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## THE MOUNTAIN DEVIL; or, Yellow Jack, the Outlaw Captain.

BY HARRY HAZARD.

AUTHOR OF "ARKANSAW JACK," ETC., ETC.

URBANA, OHIO.

RESELLER & STATION



STANDING ERECT UPON A LARGE BOWLER, HALF-WAY UP THE HILL, WAS A HUMAN FORM, THOUGH STRANGE AND WILD LOOKING ENOUGH TO HAVE BEEN TAKEN FOR SOMETHING SUPERNATURAL.

## The Mountain Devil;

OR,

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## CHAPTER I.

## A BLOW IN THE DARK.

"WELL, Burr, any change to-day?"

"Yes—a great one."

"For better or worse?"

"The road will be open for us to morrow. She's dying."

"Dying? is it possible? And the poor creature seemed so much better this morning."

"Listen—there!"

A quavering, pitiful wail came to their ears, proceeding from a small white tent, half-hidden beneath the low-hanging boughs of the grove. That cry told the two men, plainer than spoken words, the sad truth. It told of a household broken and dismembered; of a bereaved husband and daughter, of a dearly-beloved wife and mother who had journeyed thus far from the home of her childhood, only to find a lone grave upon the prairie, or beside the rock-bound rivulet that wound its noisy way adown the valley.

The two young men stood in silence, gazing toward the tent of mourning. They did not speak, though not a little agitated. And yet one of the two caught himself secretly exulting in the thought that now the greatest difficulty was removed from the path he had laid out to follow.

The little valley was studded here and there with diminutive tents, while the white-tilted wagons stood grouped together in an oblong circle. These alone would have proclaimed the truth; a company of emigrants tenanted the valley.

Such sights were far from being uncommon in that year—1850. A year before the Californian "gold-fever" broke out. The first rush was made by men—young and old. But then the fever spread. It infected all—the result was but natural. Family followed family. Almost from ocean to ocean an unbroken train of emigrants toiled wearily on—on toward the glittering phantom that but too often vanished in thin air when seemingly just within their grasp, leaving naught behind but wrecked hopes and ruined fortunes.

One link of the mighty human chain lies before our eyes. For nearly a week this valley has sheltered them. While others pressed on in the road for the yellow delusion, this party had been lying motionless, longing for, yet dreading the summons to resume their pilgrimage.

A few hasty words will explain.

This party of emigrants, numbering nearly one hundred souls, was under the command of Caleb Mitchell. He started from Eastern Ohio, in company with several of his neighbors, heading for the Land of Gold, taking with him his wife and daughter. Little by little the company grew to more respectable proportions, as stragglers joined it on the way, until now, as they entered the foothills, they felt little fear of the red-skinned Ishmaelites of whom they had heard so many frightful tales.

Nearly a week before our story opens, a sad accident occurred. A rifle, suspended by leather strings in Mitchell's wagon, by some means got discharged, its contents lodging in Mrs. Mitchell's breast.

Since then she had been hovering between life and death. To continue their journey would be her certain death, and the kind-hearted emigrants would not abandon their leader in his distress, though each day of delay increased their danger of being overtaken by winter in the mountains. Thus for nearly a week they waited and watched. Slowly Mrs. Mitchell sank, and now, on this day, her spirit took its departure. The daughter, Lottie, was the first to notice the presence of death, and it was her heartbroken wail that saluted the ears of the two young men, Burr Wythe and Paley Duplin.

"It is all over!" muttered Duplin, drawing a long breath.

"Poor girl—'twill just about kill her; she worshiped her mother," added Burr, his blue eyes winking rapidly.

"It is sad—but then, since it must be so, it's well that all is over. A long road lies before us and the mountains must be crossed before the snow falls. The lives of all depend upon it."

"Mitchell knows that. He will not delay us any longer than is absolutely necessary. But come—there is work to do. We can help them."

"Wait, Burr. I must see you to-night, alone. I have something of great importance to tell you. Meantime, look at this—but, remember, don't breathe a word of your suspicions. Keep it hid—at least until I say you may speak."

The young man, Duplin, seemed strongly excited for one of his usual phlegm. As he spoke, he thrust a small article into Wythe's hand, and renewing his caution, glided hastily away.

Wonderingly Burr bent over the stone—for such it seemed. But then a wild glow filled his eyes, lighting up his entire countenance, while his muscular form quivered like one under the influence of an ague-shock.

"Is it—can it be *gold*?" he gasped huskily.

He too was a victim of the "yellow fever." It had lured him from his far-away home amid the northern pines of Maine. It had proved stronger than the pleadings of his aged father and mother, stronger than the love of his sister and younger brother. He had left them all to chase up this glittering phantom; and now, for the first time, his eyes rested upon the substance of his dreams by day and by night.

Little wonder, then, that his heart beat fast and hard, that his brain throbbed hotly and his eyes gleamed with a wild light—with the long-smoldering fires of greed that might waken to avarice.

The little pebble lay in his palm, looking innocent enough. Its dull surface was scratched and cut here and there, as if by a knife-point. If gold, the nugget must be very pure.

"Hellow, old boy, what ye thinkin' so soberly 'bout, eh?" suddenly uttered a not disagreeable voice, as a heavy hand was placed upon Burr's shoulder, and a heavily-bearded face met his startled gaze.

Wythe started, and the nugget fell from his hand. Hastily he snatched it up and thrust it into his pocket, but not before the keen black eyes of the new-comer had fallen upon it. In his agitation Burr did not notice the quick, suspicious flash that lighted up the man's face, else he might have used more caution.

"What is it to you, Nate Upshur?" and Wythe shook the hand from his shoulder, with a gesture of dislike. "My thoughts are my own, and none the more agreeable for you thrusting yourself upon them."

"You speak sharp words, youngster, but best weigh them better. You're not in the States, now, where a man's afraid to take up a cross word for fear o' the courts. Take a fool's advice, an' give a civil answer to a civil question, or you may chance to run foul o' a snag, one o' these long-come-shortlys."

"And I hold myself ready to accommodate you, whenever you feel inclined to try it on, Nate Upshur. I hope that is plain enough for your comprehension," contemptuously added Burr, turning away.

Upshur bit his lip fiercely, and fingered the brass-bound butt of the revolver at his waist, but made no attempt to draw it.

"Fer little I'd—but never mind, now. But I would like to know whar he got that—if it was gold."

As the broad red disk of the full moon rose above the eastern swell that night, it shone down upon a peculiarly weird and impressive scene in the little timber-grove beside the creek. It was a burial in the wilderness.

Beneath a wide-spreading cottonwood tree the grave had been dug. And now, gathered round the spot with bowed and uncovered heads, stood or knelt every member of the wagon-train, listening to the broken, sobbing words of the bereaved husband, Mr. Mitchell. His daughter, Lottie, was beside him, pale and care-worn, bearing up against the blow with a fictitious strength that threatened to give way at any moment.

There was scarcely a dry eye among all these, as the strong man broke down, and bowing his head, mingled his tears with those of his daughter. It was a moment of heart-crushing agony.

Lottie, who was completely exhausted, swooned and was borne to the nearest tent by sympathizing friends. Mr. Mitchell, nerving himself to the task, completed the service, then stood by in silence, while the dead was being hidden forever from mortal view. Then, in a low but steady voice, he spoke:

"I thank you, friends, for your kindness. I will not soon forget it. But now go and try to sleep. We can afford to lose no more time. To-morrow day-dawn must see us once more upon the road. Go—leave me alone here for a minute."

"Come with me, Wythe, and you, too, Tyrrel," muttered Paley Duplin. "There's something I'd like to talk over with you to-night."

"Is it about that piece—"

"Yes—but hist!" and Duplin glanced apprehensively around him. "We three are enough. I don't care for more in the secret—much less *that man*," and he nodded to where Nate Upshur stood leaning against a tree-trunk close at hand.

"Come, then; the knoll out yonder is the best place. No one could get within ear-shot of us, even should they try, without being seen."

"What's up, boys?" muttered Jack Tyrrel, a young rattle-brained Ohioan.

"Wait—you'll know soon enough."

Gaining the knoll spoken of, the three friends crouched down amid the tall, rank grass and lighted their pipes. Duplin was the first to break the silence.

"You looked at what I showed you, Burr?"

"Yes; it's gold. Where did you get it, Paley?"

"Gold—let's see," eagerly interrupted Tyrrel.

"Wait—the moon does not shine clear enough to show it now. Now, then, I want you to pay particular attention to what I say. Weigh it well in your minds, for on this night the whole course of our future lives may depend. That is, on how you decide. You understand?"

"Yes—that is, I would if I *did*, but I *don't*," muttered Jack, lugubriously. "Well, go on, any how."

"You know what we are going to California after?"

"Sure! After gold, the shining dust—the great blazing nuggets, big as a water-bucket. Those are what we're after of course."

"You'd know it when you found one, I suppose, Jack?" and Duplin smiled slightly.

"Bah! any fool knows gold."

"Well, I do. But, as I was about to say, I don't think there is any need of our going clear to California for what we can get closer."

"What—Duplin, what do you mean?" demanded Wythe, gazing keenly into his comrade's face.

"No, Burr; I'm an honest man, if not a good one. You need not fear anything of *that* sort. But I'll tell you all now, on one condition. Promise me faithfully that neither one of you will ever breathe a word of my secret until after one year has passed. This, I mean, provided you refuse to accept my proposal, for if you do accept it, I know you'll keep silent. How is it—do you agree?"

"I reckon we can, Burr."

"Yes; though I have not known you long, Duplin, I believe you are an honest man. Then I promise you, on my honor as a man, that I well never, by word, sign, or hint, reveal what you confide to me as a secret."

"And I say the same; will swear to it, if you prefer," added Tyrrel.

"No, I can trust you without that. Well, then, listen—Hist! I thought I heard a footprint," muttered Duplin, warily.

"I guess it comes from the camp," suggested Burr, rising erect and gazing keenly around. "I can see nothing nearer than there."

"It may be; I suppose I am nervous. I wouldn't like for any one to overhear what I'm about to say, for though enough for us three, it would go but a little way divided among the train."

"It?"

"By that I mean what I have found—what I stumbled on this afternoon as I was coming back to camp. Boys—I've found a placer!"

"Eh—what?" stammered the two young men, completely amazed, though their thoughts had already reverted to some such revelation.

"Tis true—I've found a gold placer—a pocket—a regular bed of gold!" panted Duplin, his eyes fairly blazing.

Wythe gazed keenly into Duplin's face, as though trying to decide whether or no he had gone crazy. Jack Tyrrel divided his glances between them, the while dolefully scratching his curly pate.

"Yes, think of that! A regular bed of gold, full of nuggets that are so pure you can mark them with a pin-point, almost. I could have filled my pockets in an hour."

"Where is it—where is it? Let's go there now, before some one else steals it away! Come on; thunder and lightning, man, why don't you come?" muttered Tyrrel, half-angrily.

"Easy, Jack," and Duplin calmed his exultation by a desperate effort. "Do you want the whole train after us? No, no; we must work more cunningly than that. I've planned it all; listen, and I'll tell you what we must do."

"Wait, Paley," quietly interrupted Burr.

"Begin at the beginning and tell it all. First, how came you to find this pocket?"

"You know I went out hunting early this morning. Well, I had no luck, and it was past noon before I got a shot. Then I dropped a 'bighorn,' after an hour's work sneaking over the rocks. It fell down a precipice, and pretty soon I found a pass by which I could follow after. It was hard work, though, and I no sooner reached the valley, or basin, rather, than I began hunting for water."

"Half a mile distant I saw what looked like the bed of a creek, and set off toward it. Such it proved, in fact, though the water was missing. I set off up its bed, hoping to find a water-hole or something of the kind. Nearly a mile further up the bed began to spread and grow more shallow. Then I knew that if I found water, it must be by digging for it."

"I did dig, in a dozen places, but all was dry. At one spot I kept digging until I made a hole nearly shoulder deep, as the sand felt cool and damp. My knife struck on what seemed to be a pebble, and I pulled it out with one hand and flung it aside. As I did so, the sunlight glittered from its side, where my knife had struck. I looked—it was the lump you have, Wythe—and saw that it was gold!" and pausing, Duplin burriedly brushed the sweat from his brow, though the night air was cool and bracing.

"Great Lord! go on—hurry up!" muttered Tyrrel, excitedly.

"One glance told me what it was. It was what I had journeyed over fifteen hundred miles in search of, and there it lay, in my hand. I tell you, boys, it nearly killed me—and I haven't got over it yet. I half believe now that I am asleep and only dreaming all this; I do, honestly."

"I did then, too. I sat there for a full hour, almost afraid to move, looking first at the hole, then at the nugget. I told myself over and over again that I was a fool—that this was only a stray lump that had been dropped here by some Indians years ago. And yet, even as I said so, the top sand seemed to melt away, showing to me great masses of gold, pure and yellow, looking like pattered sunshine. Actually, for a time I believe I was mad—gold crazy."

"Look here, Paley Duplin," muttered Jack Tyrrel, suspiciously, as the young man paused in his speech. "Better mind what you're about. If this is a joke—if you are making this all up just to have a laugh at us, I'll lick you clean out o' your boots! If I don't, then it's no matter!"

"It's no joke, Jack, my dear fellow, but sober earnest. Sometimes, though, I feel tempted to wish it was a joke."

"Duplin!"

"A fact. I don't know *why*, but there seems to be a cloud over me—I feel as though some great calamity was impending. Boys, you may laugh at me, but while I was thus stupefied I saw my mother's spirit before me, beckoning me to leave the spot. She—it was crying, I thought, as though I was in peril. I saw it as plain as I see you now. I flung down the nugget and fled. Not far, though. Then I stopped. The bright, yellow devils seemed to beckon me back. I took a step forward, and she vanished. Then I went back to the hole," and as he spoke Duplin trembled violently.

"And you found it then—the hole, I mean? It hadn't vanished?" whispered Jack, breathlessly.

"No," smiling faintly. "It was still there. I dug then, like a madman, I tore up the ground for a dozen feet around. Look—my fingers are worn to the quick. I found more nuggets—I found a dozen more, all larger than that, lying close together. I don't know how large the pocket may be, but I saw enough to feel sure that there is a great fortune there for each one of us; enough, at any rate, to make us independent through life."

"You thought of us, then, as sharers in the pocket with you?" queried Burr Wythe.

"No, not then. I only thought of myself, and of how I could secure the treasure without being suspected and robbed—for I believe that, in my madness then, I would have denied my own father a nugget from all that store. It was horrible—that sensation. I can realize now what a miser feels. God protect me from another such attack!" shuddered Duplin.

"But your plan—what do you intend doing?"

"I've weighed the matter well, and this is what I've decided upon. We three are enough. I selected you two, because I knew that I could depend upon you. Our first move will be to desert the wagon-train."

"Desert?"

"Yes. What is there to hinder us? Nothing. We are passengers, and our fare is already paid.

We owe them nothing. They will be the gainers as well as we."

"How can we get our tools without exciting suspicion, though?"

"We don't need them. One pickax will be enough. We can shape wooden shovels with our knives. This, our blankets and weapons are all we need. Remember that what mining we do, will only be in the soft sand. The gold is in nuggets, not dust or scales, so there will be little or no washing to be done. As for food, a day's hunt will furnish enough to last us a week, with care in curing it. You see I've neglected nothing. True, we may encounter dangers and suffer privations, but no more here than there where we first started for."

"Two, or perhaps three weeks' work, then we can start for home. Two months, at the furthest—then we will be made men for life. Now you know all. What is your decision?"

"You say we must desert?" mused Wythe, thoughtfully.

"Yes. What excuse could we give? We must slip off to-night, without a word to *anybody*. I know what you are thinking of, Wythe. Nay, don't flush up so. 'Tis nothing to be ashamed of. She's a noble, true-hearted girl, and one that would be a rich prize for any man. I might have loved her myself, only that I had a talisman. In Ohio there is one waiting for me, who, please God, will one day be my wife," and Duplin, as he spoke, reverently uncovered his head.

"You are right, friend, and I'm not offended. But—I would like to speak a word to her before we go, just to keep her from thinking hard of us."

"You could not, Burr, without giving a broad clew to our purpose. She would not be able to see you to night, anyhow, after her poor mother's death. You must have patience. Think how short the time will be, if you do not fling this chance from you, before you can go to her with a free heart and full hand."

"He talks good sense, Burr. Some other time will do to say good-by in."

"Well, maybe it is for the best. I'd only make a fool of myself. Then, here's my hand. I'm with you, Duplin, for better or worse."

"I'm number three!" chimed in Tyrrel.

"Good! Now there only remains to collect our things. I'll see to the pick. I left mine out, to-day, after that. See to your arms and ammunition, and get a store of coffee. It's paid for, remember. Fill your pockets with cold grub, for they *may* make a search for us, though I hardly think it. Time's too precious for that. Go, now, and keep close guard over your tongues. 'Twould take but a trifle to direct suspicion when we are found gone, and then good-by to our fortune."

"Trust us—we'll be wise as the dove, and so forth," muttered Tyrrell.

The three plotters glided away and soon rejoined the camp. Scarcely had they disappeared from view, when a dark figure cautiously raised itself above the level of the prairie-grass, where it had been concealed in a hollow, and peered curiously after them, a low, disagreeable chuckle breaking from the black-bearded lips.

"Ho! ho! ho! Nate Upshur, you're in luck, my boy! Fust you see the nugget Wythe drops, then you hear Duplin whisper to him an' Tyrrell, and now, best of all, you hear the whole story! Thar's luck in odd numbers—and yet I'm goin' to have a finger in the pie, too."

Then he, too, proceeded stealthily toward the camp, by a circuitous route, entering unobserved.

That night, the sick-camp was the scene of strange acts. And among them was one of terror—or of cold-blooded, merciless crime.

As the bright moon sailed from behind a dense cloud, a dark figure silently crept into the shadow cast by a small white tent. From within, as the shadow paused, came the sound of calm, steady breathing. Then the door-flap was raised—the black shadow cautiously glided into the tent, like a venomous serpent in human form. The flap falls behind the serpent, and all is still.

Then—a horrible sound breaks the stillness of the night—a faint, gasping, half-stifled groan of death-agony. Then the shadow reappears, bearing in one hand a blood-stained knife, in the other a small parcel that chinks metallic-like as it falls from its hand. Then all is still.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE TELLTALE PIPE.

LONG before the first beams of breaking day illuminated the eastern horizon, the shrill voice of the little, wrinkled, half-apish-looking guide, Paul Chicot, roused the sleeping camp, bidding

all prepare for a long, hard day's travel. Eagerly the emigrants flew around, for once more the golden phantom seemed beckoning them on.

And yet, despite their anxiety, that day was to carry them no nearer the golden land. A blow fell that for the moment drove away all such thoughts.

"Whar's Dutchy?" suddenly queried Paul Chicot, running his beadlike eyes rapidly around the little group.

As customary, the emigrants were regularly divided into "messes." One of these messes was formed by the guide, Chicot, Nate Upshur, an Irishman called Tim Dooley, and "Dutchy," as the fourth member was familiarly known.

The last personage was an enigma to the greater portion of the emigrants. At times he appeared the polished scholar, then again one of the most ignorant men imaginable. He had joined the train at St. Charles, preferring the overland route on account of his poor health, hoping thus to recuperate. He seemed possessed of plenty of money, paying his fare in gold, without a demur at the price.

"I don't know—I hain't seen him since last night," replied Upshur, wiping his lips, after a long draught of coffee.

"Go hyste him out, Tim. He takes so durned long to fix up his h'ar an' teeth afore eatin' that he won't be ready fer the road none too soon. Tell 'im we're all ready fer startin'," muttered Chicot.

Dooley rose and glided toward a small tent a little to one side, and pushing back the hanging door flap, entered. The next moment he reappeared, staggering back with starting eyeballs and hair standing on end, a wild cry bursting from his pallid lips.

The shrill cry startled the entire camp, and all eyes were turned toward the trembling man. Paul Chicot was the first to speak, in an angry tone:

"What the devil's the matter wi' ye, now, I'd like to ax? See'd another snake, eh?" he asked, sarcastically.

"It's murther, that's what it is! He's kilt—kilt intirely!" gasped Dooley, his eyes still glaring toward the quiet tent, as if enchanted by the horrible object lying so still and ghostly within.

"Who's kilt—not Dutchy?" quietly demanded Upshur, stepping forward.

Chicot, giving over all idea of getting anything satisfactory out of the stupefied Irishman, sprung forward and flung aside the strip of canvas that protected the entrance. One glance told him the truth. Tim was right. Murder had been done!

Lying upon a couple of blankets, was all that remained of their quaint, pleasant comrade, Carl Hefler, or "Dutchy," the sobriquet suggested by his broken, stammering speech.

The long, slim figure lay at full length, as though peacefully slumbering, but the arms were flung wide, the long, bony fingers were clutched as though in agony. An agonized expression had frozen upon the thin, pallid face.

On the white shirt-bosom was a great stain—a stain of that peculiar, unmistakable color that seldom requires a second glance to designate. Directly above the heart the stain was blackest. There the blow had been dealt.

Chicot, old and thoroughly versed in that art peculiar to his craft and the detectives—of remarking *everything*—knew that no feeble, faltering hand had dealt this blow. Either the hand of an unusually bold and cool-headed man, or else that of one to whom such deeds had been familiar.

He knew that the murderer had crept fairly into the tent, and glided close to the victim, as he lay buried in unconscious slumber, and that he must have even felt out the region of the heart, since all within had been dark, else the blow could never have been delivered with such deadly precision.

"What is all this, Chicot?" hurriedly demanded the leader, Mitchell, as he reached the guide's side.

"It's *murder*—that's what it is," coolly returned Chicot.

"But who could—"

"That's jest what I'm goin' to find out, if you give me time. Keep back—don't none o' you step inside here until I say ye may. Mebbe that's some sign left."

"Wouldn't it be a good plan to call the roll and see if all are present?" suddenly suggested Upshur, his eyes gleaming furtively.

"'Twon't do no harm. You mought as well, cap'n," muttered Chicot. "This'll keep us back half the day, anyhow, ef not more."

Mitchell promptly sounded his whistle—and

taught its meaning, the members of the wagon-train followed his lead back to the open ground. Upshur ran his eyes hastily over the group. Then the evil glow deepened, and his lip curled with triumph.

Chicot, free from the annoying crowd, proceeded with his investigations, with all the relish of a true-born detective. Yet there seemed little show of his making any discovery, since the floor of the little tent was beaten hard and dry by the murdered man's own feet, during the stay at the sick-camp.

Of course no *trail* had been left, nor did he seek for one. His eyes had already fallen upon the little leather satchel, lying beside the dead man's head, where it had been dragged from beneath the blankets. Its lock was unbroken, but one side had been slit through with a knife—the same weapon that had dealt the death blow, for the leather was stained here and there with blood.

"He stuck 'im fer the money," muttered Paul, as he dropped the valise.

Suddenly he stooped and lifted the right arm of the dead man. A tiny point of something yellow had caught his keen eye.

Chicot uttered a low grunt, and started back. The clew was before him; and yet he scarce believed his eyes. Could it be!

Exposed to view lay a small, curiously-carved meerschaum pipe, with stem of bright, clear amber. This it was that had caught his eye.

Chicot turned and left the tent, slowly gliding out toward where Mitchell was calling over the list. The guide's brows contracted as he listened.

"John Tyrrel."

"Not here," slowly replied a voice, after a brief, painful silence.

"Burr Wythe."

"I reckon he's gone, too, cap'n," quietly uttered Chicot. "Thar ain't much use o' your goin' any furder. I think I've found the right end o' the trail."

"What do you mean, Paul?" cried Mitchell, in surprise. "Surely you don't suspect—"

"I don't go by 'spicions, myself, but I know a trail when I strike it. Come an' look fer yourself—one at a time, though. See what I've found, then say who it b'longs to."

One by one the party filed into the tent and glanced at the tell-tale pipe. All recognized it. There was not another in any wise resembling it in the company.

"Whose pipe is it, boys?" demanded Chicot.

"Burr Wythe's!" came the reply, the voice of Nate Upshur above all others.

"But he may not have dropped it there," suggested Mitchell; "might not Hesler have borrowed it?"

"No," declared Upshur, stepping forward. "Hesler went to bed just after dark, and I saw Wythe smoking that pipe as late as two o'clock, and he was talking with Jack Tyrrel and Paley Duplin, at the time."

"It's so—I see'd 'em, too," reluctantly added Chicot.

"I admit that it has an awkward look, but after all, though those three are absent, they may return soon and clear matters up. If he, or they, are guilty, I will not be one of those who would seek to screen them from justice; but for all that, they shall not be condemned without a chance to clear themselves. First we must find them," said the wagon-master.

"But it is nearly sunrise; we were to take up the march to-day," ventured one.

"Justice first; we must not let this brutal murder go unavenged. One day, more or less, can make but little difference to us, in the end. If Wythe did kill him, he must pay the penalty."

"But what object could he have in doing it? They were good friends, so far as I know."

"Look here," uttered Chicot, lifting the cut satchel. "This is what the Dutchman kept his money in. He was a simple-hearted feller, like, an' didn't seem to think but that all was as honest as he was bissell, fer he showed us his money only two nights ago. We laughed at him, I 'member, fer kerryin' gold to Calforney, but he wasn't goin' to dig. He went overland fer his health, and then he was goin' to ship fer Chinese land, or some sech place, I b'lieve."

"Who was with you when he showed the money?"

"He was—Burr Wythe—an' a lot more," reluctantly added Chicot.

Mitchell looked sobered. He had formed a high opinion of the young man, but he could no longer blind himself to the fact that suspicion pointed strongly toward young Wythe as the murderer. And he saw, too, that this belief

was gradually gaining ground among the emigrants, and deep whispers ran round, while eyes flashed and brows grew black. The spirit of Lynch-law was rapidly arising, and woe be unto the victim that should first feel its power!

"Easy, men," he shouted, waving his hand. "Keep silent for a moment and listen to me. There must be no mad action here. We must proceed carefully and justly. First, you must elect a leader, whose word shall be law; then we must hunt up the missing men and hear their defense. That one murder has been committed is no reason that another should follow. I cast my vote for a fair trial."

"So we all do, I reckon," chimed in Paul Chicot. "And I don't know any better man for Judge Lynch than you be. What say, boys?"

"Good—good!" came an almost unanimous shout; but Nathan Upshur was silent.

"Very well; I will act as such, since you demand it. And I am glad, for one thing. After what I have already spoken, it shows that you aim at strict and impartial justice. But now to work. If they have really abandoned the train—as of course they have, if they did kill Hesler—they must have taken food and other articles that would be missed. And a close search may give us the clew. You know the messes they belonged to; go and search closely. Chicot, come with me. I wish a word with you."

Once fairly set to work, there was little time lost. In ten minutes the report was given. A small supply of provisions had been taken, and one pick-ax was missing; but that all believed to have been mislaid somewhere. No one—save Upshur—dreamed that the deserters had taken it.

Paul Chicot gave his supposition or conjecture concerning the course most likely to be followed by the deserters. He believed they would take to the neighboring mountains, there to lie hidden until all search was given over. They would not be likely to take the back-trail, as they were afoot, and the country in that direction was mostly open and level.

"I believe you're right, Chicot," remarked Mitchell, thoughtfully, "and we will act on that supposition first. We'd best form three or four parties and each choose a separate trail, for this day is all we can spare without absolute danger to the whole train."

Little time was lost, now that the duty before them was fairly decided upon, and all entered upon it with growing eagerness. There is something strangely exciting in a *man-hunt*. Set a warm friend upon the track of another, and, when once fairly aroused, that friend will be as inveterate and deadly in pursuit as though a lifelong enemy.

This trait was exemplified now. Before an hour more passed by, even those who had first declared their belief in the young man's innocence, were the foremost in searching for his trail, eager to bring him to justice.

Nathan Upshur kept close to Paul Chicot, the guide, eying him furtively, seemingly ill at ease. It was plainly evident that he felt no great desire for Burr Wythe's capture. Indeed, he tried to mislead Paul, and finally succeeded in doing so.

Upshur had stealthily followed the three deserters for a considerable distance, on the night before, when they started for the "golden bed," as Duplin had called it, the better to satisfy his mind as to the location of the places. And now for reasons of his own, he craftily led Chicot far astray from the right course, though none of the trail-hunters suspected his purpose.

Satisfied with this, Upshur contentedly followed the guide's lead, feeling assured there was little or no danger of striking the deserters' trail, on that day at least. But at a cry from Chicot, his heart leaped wildly, and the flush left his face pale and ghastly.

"Hold! Stand back, you fellers," cried Chicot, lifting a hand in warning, as his companions rushed forward, eager to learn the cause of his sudden exclamation.

"What is it, Chicot?" gasped Upshur.

"A trail, but not the one we're looking fer," was the slow reply, as Paul closely scrutinized the ground.

Upshur gave a gasp of relief, unnoticed by those near, and then pressed forward. Pausing beside Chicot, he bent his gaze down upon the narrow strip of moist sand, upon which was imprinted the strange trail.

There, plainly outlined, was the impress of a large human foot, naked and bare. That it was not made by an Indian was plain, for though many white men in-toe, a red-man, un-

less an habitual drunkard, never toes out, as this trail plainly did. Then, again, an Indian's foot, from never having been tightly compressed in boots or shoes, is very flat and broad; this trail was made by a man with a high-instep and arching sole.

"How do you know it isn't one of them?" asked Upshur.

"Easily enough. Look back along the trail. You see, it crosses that stretch o' splintered rocks! Now, look at these tracks. The foot ain't cut none. That shows that it's made by a feller that's used to goin' bar'foot fer a long time. If you was to cross that, you'd cut, an' gouge your hoofs so this 'ere 'd be a trail o' blood. See?"

"But who can it be then?"

"Don't know. It's fresh—ain't bin made over a hour, at furderest. Whoever it is, must be in the hills yender. I move we foller on' an' find 'im. Mebbe he kin tell us somethin' 'bout the boys," suggested Chicot, moving forward, without waiting to learn the wishes of his followers.

In fact, Chicot was only too glad of a good excuse to delay the search of Burr Wythe. Though firmly believing him guilty of the murder, yet he did not wish to be the instrument of justice. In his quiet, unobtrusive way he loved Burr almost as he would have loved a son.

The trail led in a direct line toward the hills, here rising abrupt and rocky, broken and rugged. Though at times losing all trace, Chicot found little difficulty in recovering the trail as often.

An abrupt exclamation from Nathan Upshur startled him, and all eyes turned upon him. His face wore an expression of wonder, as he pointed with outstretched hand toward the rocks above the party.

"Look there! Is it man or devil?"

Glancing in the direction indicated, the trail-hunters beheld the object of his wonder. And they, too, stood as if bewildered. And little wonder. A truly strange object was before their eyes.

Standing erect upon a large boulder, half-way up the hill, was a human form, though strange and wild-looking enough to have been taken for something supernatural. One long arm was extended, pointing toward them, the rags that only partially clothed the member fluttering in the brisk breeze.

The stranger seemed far above the usual height of men, and of great age, if the long, flowing hair and beard of snowy whiteness be taken as evidence. This the wind tossed wildly around his face in a fleecy cloud.

Rude, uncouth garments partially covered his body and limbs, patched here and there with pieces of skin and fur. In one hand he bore a heavy bow, tightly strung. At his shoulder could be seen the feathered tips of a number of arrows.

"It's the Mountain Devil!" muttered Chicot, in a low, husky tone, as he shrunk back, his bronzed cheek paling, his eyes dilating with a look of fear.

"Man or devil, I do not fear him!" said Upshur, as his rifle clicked sharply as the hammer was lifted.

"Don't shoot! Make him mad an' he'll clean out the whole crowd!" warily cried Paul, his eyes still riveted upon the strange form.

"He's a devil—you can't hurt him."

"I'll try it anyhow," and the man's rifle spoke sharp and clear.

The wild man started and seemed to stagger, as though the bullet had found its mark. Then, with a shrill cry, he turned and leaped from the boulder, the next moment disappearing far up the hillside.

"There's your devil, Paul," chuckled Upshur, as he dropped his rifle and began reloading it.

"And I had only a leaden bullet in, too."

"You laugh now—but the time I'll come when you won't. Believe it or not, Nate Upshur, you've signed your death papers. A man never shot at the Mountain Devil but he died for it. You will, too. Mebbe not to-day—mebbe not for a year, but the time I'll come, I tell you—the time I'll come at last. Mark my words."

"Bah! you've listened too much to Indian legends, Chicot. That is no devil, but a man, like you or I, turned hermit like. To prove it, I'm going to follow after. Come on, boys. Let's go and see what Paul's devil is made of, anyhow," recklessly said Upshur, who was no coward, whatever else he might be.

Pale and disturbed, Chicot followed the boaster, and close behind came the other emigrants, curious to see the denouement. At the boulder Upshur paused, with a harsh laugh.

"See!" and he pointed to the rocks before him. "Your devil bleeds, Paul, like an ordinary man. I thought I touched the rascal."

Here and there drops of blood sprinkled the rocky surface, and Chicot, though still skeptical, brightened up. After all, this wild man was not proof against mortal weapons.

Laughing scornfully, Upshur led the way along the bloody trail, up the hillside, until it crossed the ridge, keeping a good look-out to guard against surprise, for none knew better than he what awkward weapons flint-headed arrows are, at close quarters, when guided by a strong and experienced hand. And after his wound, the wild man would not be likely to stand on ceremony, should he be overtaken.

But overtaken he was not, at least on that occasion. The hillside seemed to be unoccupied, save by the trail-hunters, but Upshur suddenly paused, when half-way down the hill, shrinking back with a cry of horror.

Passing through the dense bushes, he had found himself upon the very verge of a steep precipice. Staggering back, he clutched the bushes, unmanned.

"Look yonder!" cried Chicot, pointing downward. "Now what do you say—is he a devil, or not?"

Swiftly racing along the narrow valley far below, was the form of the wild man. To reach this, he must have descended the precipice, and that seemed beyond mortal skill to accomplish.

Wonderingly the emigrants watched him until he disappeared upon the further hill, then they slowly retraced their steps toward camp. The sun was far down in the west, and they had found no trace of the deserters.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE GOLDEN BED.

THE three adventurers, Duplin, Wythe, and Tyrrel, little imagined that at least one pair of keen eyes observed very closely their movements on that memorable night, as they noiselessly went about their preparations for their desertion. Jack and Paley were filled with golden visions of the enormous wealth that only awaited their coming to gather it up in handfuls, while Burr thought far more of pretty Lottie Mitchell, and how she would receive the tidings of the strange desertion, for it could be called by no other name.

"Never mind—if the deposit is as rich as Paley declares, we can finish before winter, and then—"

Wythe smiled faintly as a far-away look came into his handsome eyes. Even to himself he does not finish the thought, for, though he loved Lottie Mitchell with all his young heart, he had scarce spoken a score of times with her, during the journey.

Still watched by Nate Upshur, the three adventurers silently left the camp and set forth upon their mission, all, even the rattle-brained Jack Tyrrel, feeling serious, for, truly, it was no commonplace step they were taking and one that might well result disastrously. Turning, they cast a last look at the silent camp of the wagon-train that for so many days had been their only home, and then, led by Duplin, they disappeared beyond the ridge, still followed by Nate Upshur, who exhibited the skill and address of a veritable savage.

After a rapid tramp of several miles, Duplin paused and said:

"Now, boys, for a little headwork. First, shall we go on at once to the pocket?"

"How far is it?"

"Not ten miles, as the crow flies."

"We can reach it before day, then!"

"Yes—if we wish. But, frankly, I don't think we had better go there, at least not before to-morrow night."

"Why so?"

"Well, there is a risk. To be sure they may not think it worth while to make any search for us when our disappearance is found out, yet still they may, especially as the most dangerous portion of the trail is near at hand. You see three rifles such as ours would count in case of an attack."

"If I thought there was the slightest danger of that, I would return at once," suddenly cried Wythe, thinking of Lottie Mitchell.

"I don't think there is. You remember the treaty we heard of at the fort? The Indians are all peaceable now. But, as I was saying, they may try to follow our trail, and if we lay it straight to the pocket, ten to one that Paul Chicot picks it out with those keen eyes of his. Then? Instead of a fortune, we'd have only a few ounces apiece, and perhaps have to fight for

that. You know the material many of the emigrants are composed of. Brave men enough, but rather peculiar in their ideas of honesty. It would be 'divide or fight' and as I found the pocket, I consider our claim is the best."

"You are right there, Paley. But you decide. Whatever you think best, we will agree to. You agree, Tyrrel?"

"Yes; Duplin is captain."

"Very well, then. We will strike over there toward those hills, and hide there until certain that all fear of pursuit is over. Then to the pocket and clean it out, after which—ho! for home!"

With long, swift strides, Duplin, greatly excited, no doubt, by the picture his last words had conjured up before his mind's eye, led the way toward the hill alluded to, that rose abruptly high into the air, rocky, broken and wild-looking.

After him trudged Burr and Jack, little dreaming of the strange adventure that was to meet them there, in the heart of that wild, desolate spot.

Duplin, who by his superior age and experience, naturally assumed the position of leader during the adventure, soon selected a spot where the trio could very comfortably remain concealed during the ensuing day, should their fear of a pursuit prove correct, and at the same time one not entirely devoid of comfort.

Entering a narrow, level valley, on one side of which uprose an almost perpendicular cliff, its face scarred and jagged, studded here and there with stunted evergreen shrubs or parasitic plants, they soon found a secure covert upon the opposite side, where the hill was less abrupt and more easy of ascent. From here they had a fair view of the cliff, as well as the open ground beyond the mouth of the valley, in the direction from whence they had come.

"I move that you two lie down for a nap while I stand guard," quoth Duplin, as the trio sunk back upon the soft, mossy earth behind the vine-clad rock.

"I want a smoke first," said Tyrrel, producing his pipe.

"And so do I, but can't find my pipe," muttered Wythe, vexedly. "I must have lost it on the way."

"Never mind; that is easily replaced—I mean so far as comfort is concerned. A bit of bark—a joint of the 'carpenter's weed,' and you have it."

The three comrades conversed in low, eager tones, of the fortune that lay waiting their coming, and magnificent were the air-castles they each reared, when they should return home, rich men. But one delicious one Burr Wythe hugged to his own heart. Only one ear must hear that dream—the ear of sweet Lottie Mitchell.

"Hist!" muttered Duplin, after an hour or more had crept by.

The two young men caught the same sound, with him, and needed not the caution to cease their conversation. From close above them, on the hillside, there rattled down several pebbles, evidently dislodged by human aid, for directly afterward the trio could hear a footstep, light, yet deliberate, evidently descending the slope.

Instinctively each man grasped his weapon, for the same thought occurred to each. If this footfall betokened the presence of Indians, as seemed but too probable, there was danger threatening. Right well they knew that no true woodman could pass by, in such close proximity, without detecting the scent of tobacco-smoke, and that, once scented, he would not rest until the matter was thoroughly investigated. And, though the Indians were nominally at peace, they well knew that if a superior force was at hand, that fact would be but a feeble restraint. At best they must expect to be plundered, and as that meant either starvation or a return to the wagon-train, the three men prepared silently for a struggle.

The sound of footsteps ceased, and for several minutes all was silent. Motionless as death, tightly grasping their weapons, the gold-hunters awaited the result in stern suspense.

But their preparations, in this case, were needless, for the footstep again met their ears, and then, through the surrounding screen of bushes, they observed a tall figure glide past their covert, descending the hill. Even in that brief glimpse, they saw enough to deeply excite their curiosity.

Peering through the bushes they saw that the stranger had again paused: this time standing upon a boulder, in the full glare of the bright moonlight. They were gazing upon the same being who, a few hours later, was pronounced the Mountain Devil by Paul Chicot.

They could distinguish his features; pale, haggard, and wearing a peculiarly mournful expression, that still did not conceal the vacant stare that proclaimed a shattered mind. This thought occurred to each of the three men. They were watching a madman.

They noted his ragged dress, rudely patched with skins and bits of various furs. They saw that he was armed with a bow and arrows, and that a long-bladed knife was dangling at his side.

This much they noted before he stepped from the rock and resumed his course toward the valley. Arising, the gold-hunters closely observed his movements, until hidden in the shade cast by the towering precipice beyond.

"Wonder what—or who the fellow is, anyhow?" muttered Tyrrel, reflectively.

"I don't know, unless—You've heard Paul Chicot speak of a wild man they sometimes call the 'Mountain Devil,' haven't you?"

"Who hasn't, I wonder?" with a shrug. "I've heard of nothing else since we've been camped here."

"I believe this is the being he means, then."

"You don't—thunder! I always thought he was lying!"

"Hark!" muttered Burr, touching his comrades.

From out the gloom, in the direction in which the strange being had disappeared, there came a clear, shrill whistle, long-drawn and quavering. Eagerly the gold-hunters watched and listened.

"Look there—see that light!" uttered Duplin, after a brief silence. "What can it mean—up there, too?"

A small but brilliant point of light had suddenly appeared, as though hanging nearly midway up the cliff, not steady and fixed, but slightly wavering, or moving slowly from side to side. Evidently, it was suspended there by some human agency; but who?

"Is there not a human form close beside the light? It seems so to me," whispered Wythe.

"Wait. The light is in answer to that whistle. Perhaps Paul's Devil has his home up there, and that is one of its imps," half-laughed Duplin.

Still closely watching, the three friends a few moments later saw a tall form arise beside the light, that, the next instant, vanished from sight. But not before another discovery was made.

A human being had been holding the light, and as the wild man took it, the upper portion of the second person had been distinctly, though momentarily revealed. Duplin was the first to speak, after the disappearance.

"Did you see that, boys?"

"I saw something—a shadow, or—"

"I saw the form of a woman!" declared Burr, in a peculiar tone of voice.

"So I thought, but was not sure. I don't know what to think of it. There's some deep mystery here," added Paley, reflectively.

"I move we expose it, then," impulsively cried Jack. "Who knows—maybe 'tis a princess in disguise—or else carried off and kept in seclusion by some evil genie! An adventure—let's go!"

"Easy, rattle-pate," laughed Duplin. "You forget what frightful tales Paul told of this creature, and whether they have any foundation in truth or not, if we attempt to solve this affair, we must use caution. If nothing more, be is a madman, and were he to discover our approach, he might do us mischief. One man there—for they must have a cave, or something of the sort—one man there could keep a thousand at bay who tried to reach him by scaling the cliff."

"Is it worth the risk?" thoughtfully uttered Wythe. "She answered his signal so promptly, there can be little doubt but she is there by her own free will. Then what right have we to molest them?"

"The right of unsatisfied curiosity—and whether you go or not, I'll not rest until I've had a good peep at the angel—for such she must be if he's a devil," cried Tyrrel, springing through the bushes as he spoke.

"Wait, Jack—you'll ruin all by your haste. We'll go—but you must not lead the way. You'll be sure to alarm them."

"Very well—all I want is to get a good look at them. Lead the way, if you'd rather."

Duplin knew the futility of reasoning with Jack, else he would not have been drawn into the foolhardy adventure so easily. He knew there was danger, Tyrrel did not. But alone, Jack would be sure to precipitate this, and hoping to avoid discovery by due caution, Duplin led the way toward the cliff, having deter-

mined the exact position where the light had been shown.

Evidently the cliff-lodgers had disappeared at the same time the light did, else they must have discovered the three dark figures as they glided across the open, level valley, plainly outlined by the moon's rays.

Reaching the foot of the cliff, they began searching for the path by which the wild-man must have ascended, but for several minutes without success. Then, however, a low whistle from Burr Wythe called Duplin and Tyrrel to his side. Even in that gloom they could see that the path bore evident traces of having been frequently used, either by bipeds or quadrupeds.

"I think this is folly, boys," muttered Duplin. "Folly or not—up I go," determinedly added Jack.

"Then I claim the right to lead the way," and so speaking, Paley Duplin cautiously began the difficult ascent, having first carefully deposited his rifle at the base of the hill; an example that was promptly imitated by his companions.

The trail was comparatively easy of ascent, but the gold-hunters made slow progress, as Duplin carefully examined each foot of the way, lest he should be misled by the numerous other clefts and seeming paths that thickly crossed the trace. Thus he neared the point from whence he felt sure the light had been shown, and as yet no signs had been given by those above that their approach had been observed.

Suddenly Duplin paused, and, turning his head, upheld his finger in warning. Then stooping, he whispered to Wythe, who stood just below him:

"Careful, now! I just caught a glimpse of the light. We're close to the spot. Caution, Tyrrel. One rash move now may be fatal!"

Though rash and hasty, Tyrrel was by no means a fool, and agreeably surprised both Wythe and Duplin by his prudence.

Cautiously, silently as so many shadowy phantoms, the gold-hunters crept on, until, their heads above the level of a broad ledge, they gazed in upon a peculiarly strange scene. Fairly holding their breath, their eyes eagerly drank in every detail.

Before them was a small, low-roofed cavern, dimly lighted up by a rude wooden lamp that sat upon a projecting spur of rock.

There were two occupants—a man and a woman. These first enchain the eyes of the gold-hunters.

The first was the man they had observed beside their covert on the opposite hill. The woman was truly a surprise when viewed in this strange, wild spot.

That she was young—not more than twenty years of age, if so much—was plain. That she was possessed of a more than ordinary beauty, needed but a second glance to tell.

She was small, of a graceful figure that even the rude dress she wore could not entirely disguise. In complexion she was a perfect blonde, with a profusion of softly-curling yellow hair, that, unconfined, fell around her person almost like a mantle.

Her garb, like that worn by the old man, was rough and uncouth, telling of a long absence from civilization. Her feet were incased in moccasins, while his feet were bare.

This strange couple were seated near each other, the woman at the wild-man's feet, feeding him as she would have done an overgrown baby, mouthful after mouthful. Neither spoke, and then, with a gesture, the man signified he had sufficient, when the maiden arose and glided away, disappearing from view of the watchers around a projecting spur of rock.

The old man arose, stretched his limbs and yawned heavily, then sunk down upon a small pallet of skins, leaving the light still burning. One hand clutched the strung bow, and the quiver of arrows lay close at hand.

Paley Duplin turned his head and motioned to his companions. Jack Tyrrel at first seemed inclined to demur, but then, as though by second thoughts, he noiselessly began the perilous descent, followed by his comrades.

This was not accomplished without considerable difficulty and, indeed, absolute danger, owing to the deceptive gloom, but fortunately the trio succeeded in gaining the valley in safety. Securing their rifles they crossed this, and once more gained their covert, tired out and sore, yet feeling rewarded by the strange discovery they had made.

Tyrrel alone had little to say. That night's events seemed to have made a deep impression upon his mind, and while his comrades discussed the subject, he remained deep buried in thought.

Upon one thing he was determined, though he said nothing to his friends about it at the time. He must see this strange beauty again, if only to ask her if this sort of life was her own choice. Further than this he did not go, even in his own secret thoughts.

It was now nearly daylight, and the comrades agreed to remain where they were concealed during that day, lest the emigrants should institute a search for them. As all felt the need of repose, the day was divided into three watches, of which Wythe took the first, Tyrrel the second, and Duplin the last.

As may well be believed, by far the greater portion of the time, their gaze rested upon the face of the cliff, marveling at the secrets its bosom contained. But little rewarded this scrutiny.

True, during Burr Wythe's watch, the hermit, wild-man, or whatever else he might be called, descended the cliff, and then set off down the valley. The young woman had accompanied him to the ledge that served as entrance to the cavern, and kneeling there watched his progress until the hill-point concealed him from view. Then, with a long, lingering glance around, she turned and entered the hill-home.

Wythe questioned whether or no to make known this circumstance to his comrades, but a fear of Jack Tyrrel's impulsiveness restrained him. That the young man had been deeply interested in the affair, he could not doubt, and were he to know that the strange maiden were alone, he might feel tempted to visit her. By this the reader is not to infer that he doubted Tyrrel's honor—far from it. But Wythe feared lest his impulsive nature should get them into trouble with the madman, and thus interfere with the gold-hunting.

Thus the day passed away, and it was not until the middle of Duplin's watch, that any thing of moment occurred. Then he quietly awoke the two men, bidding them be cautious.

Peering through the bushes, they could distinguish a small body of men, slowly moving across the mouth of the valley, seemingly trailing. The same thought occurred to each of the three men. Why this long and persistent search? Why delay the wagon-train an entire day to search for three deserters, whose passage-money had been paid in advance? This surprised them, even though they had guarded against the chance. These precautions, however, had been taken wholly upon account of the gold-pocket, not from fear of being forced to return, since they were free agents, and in no wise bound to the train.

"Hal look yonder!" muttered Wythe. "The wild man!"

This strange being could now be seen standing upon a huge boulder, not far from the edge of the precipice, evidently confronting the party of emigrants, who had now passed from view beyond the hill-point. Curiously the three men watched his motions.

They heard the report of Nathan Upshur's rifle, saw the wild man stagger and almost fall, then leap to the ground and dash up the hill. Their next view of him was as he was swinging lightly across the almost perpendicular face of the precipice, hanging by the frail vines and shrubbery, or dropping from ledge to ledge, agile and sure-footed as the mountain-goat itself. Reaching the base, he darted swiftly across the valley, passing close by the gold-hunters' covert, uttering a low, growling sound that seemed more like the anger of a wild beast than the voice of a human being.

"Did you notice?" muttered Duplin. "The blood was dripping from his breast. Those men yonder shot him."

"It spatters the rocks out here. If they follow his trail, they must discover us," added Wythe frowning.

"What difference? We're half white and free-boro. They have no control over our actions," retorted Tyrrel.

"True; yet this pick-ax coupled with our desertion, would rouse their suspicions, or rather direct them into the right channel, and I fear we would soon have more partners than would be pleasant or profitable. I don't want to meet them, if I can help it," added Duplin.

But their fears proved causeless, for the pursuit of the wild-man's trail had carried Chicot's party to one side of that left by the deserters, and that they were so close at hand was unknown to the emigrants. And after a short time the gold-hunters saw their late comrades turn and retrace their steps, evidently returning to the wagon-train, without thought of following the wounded man further after the startling exhibition he had given them of his prowess.

Just before sunset they saw the wild-man return apparently but little injured, and their doubts thus solved, soon after the trio took up their march toward the golden valley, where fortune awaited them.

Neither noted the extreme care which Jack Tyrrel observed in fixing their route upon his mind. Each rock, hill or valley was closely and thoroughly noted, so that he felt assured that he could find his way back, if need be, in the darkest night. And find his way back he had resolved he would, sooner or later.

"There!" at length muttered Duplin, pausing upon a high ridge and stretching one hand toward the valley below him. "Yonder, boys, lies our fortune!"

The others did not speak. They stood eagerly gazing downward in the direction indicated, their eyes glowing, their faces flushed hotly, their frames quivering in every fiber. The gold-fever was upon them.

And, as if infected by their excitement, Duplin lost his composure. With one accord they rushed headlong down the steep hill-side and out upon the level ground. Then Duplin abruptly paused.

"Comrades," and the words seemed to issue with difficulty, "you are standing over a bed of gold!"

#### CHAPTER IV. MABEL GUILFORD.

RETURNING to camp, Chicot's party found that the other bands had already returned without having discovered anything. That night the body of the murdered man was buried, after an earnest discussion as to whether another day should be devoted to a search for the supposed criminals. Now that the first fervor had cooled down, the vote was almost unanimous to continue their journey, all fearing lest they should be caught by the winter storms in the mountains.

So with the dawn of another day the wagon-train once more took up its due progress, toiling wearily along over the dreary trail, only cheered by the thought that each step taken was so much nearer to the fabulous heaps of pure gold that only awaited the gathering. For such were the wild visions that haunted even the most sensible, during that never-to-be-forgotten epidemic—the gold-fever.

For two days they toiled on, without any event of moment to break the killing monotony. But then came a second blow, even more crushing than the one recorded in the preceding pages, because it left the wagon-train without a head—in much the same situation as a vessel would be on losing the only man capable of steering it a right.

In a word, Paul Chicot suddenly disappeared, without leaving any trace behind him. At dark he had taken his position among the sentinels. At daybreak the train was discovered to be totally unguarded! Not only had Chicot vanished during the night, but with him had gone two others. This was just three mornings after the discovery of the first deserter.

A few words will explain the circumstances leading to this defection. Nathan Upshur was at the bottom of it all. Since his eavesdropping, when he learned of the golden pocket discovered by Paley Duplin, he had been busy shaping a way by which he could gain a share, if not the whole, of the treasure. And so well had he done his work that no one suspected his purpose until the blow was dealt.

He knew that he must have companions in the venture, as none of the deserters would willingly admit him to share in their profits. In fine, they despised, if not hated him, as he well knew.

Paul Chicot was the man he first selected as a comrade, knowing him to be brave and not over scrupulous, as well as thoroughly acquainted with the country for hundred of miles around. And, too, he knew that he was avaricious beyond the common.

The subject was first broached on the night preceding their desertion. Upshur visited the point where Chicot was standing guard, and together they smoked their pipes, idly conversing.

Then Nate suddenly said:

"Why do you follow this life, Paul?"

"I won't, no longer'n I git to the mines. Then I'll go back to St. Joe, on the Blacksnake Hills, with gold enough to keep the old woman an' gals in fine style. No more trampin' for me then—not much."

"But if you had an opportunity of getting rich before you went to California, would you refuse it?"

Chicot keenly eyed Upshur, as though seeking

to read his secret meaning, for the man's voice had lowered to a confidential tone, and a peculiar expression rested upon his face.

"That depends—not in such a way as made whoever it was rub out poor Dutchy," slowly returned Chicot.

"Bahl! why bring up such things? Of course, I don't mean anything of the sort. But now, for instance, supposing another train would come along and offer you more—ten times as much as you get for guiding *this* train—would you accept it?"

"Be I a fool? Of course I would, unless this 'ne was to raise thar pile. I work for *money*, an' the biggest pile takes my eye," quietly added Paul.

"Well, then, supposing I could take you to a gold-mine, within a day's tramp from here, would you desert the train? I say only supposing I could do this."

"That's all bosh. Don't I know thar's none sech 'round here?" contemptuously snorted Chicot.

"But would you?"

"Yas—in a burry, too."

"Swear it on this," and Upshur adroitly twitted a small metal crucifix from Chicot's bosom, where it hung by a string. "Swear to keep all secret that I tell you now, and never to betray it until I give you free permission."

Chicot, deeply impressed by Upshur's earnestness, obeyed, though still skeptical. And then, after first carefully assuring himself that there were no eavesdroppers near, Upshur unfolded his secret, telling all. How he had first struck scent of the secret, of his eavesdropping, of how he followed the deserters until he had a fair idea of their destination; of all save his connection with the dastardly blow in the dark, and the attempt to fix the crime upon Burr Wythe, for reasons that may hereafter appear.

"Now you know all," he added, "and it is for you to decide whether we are to slave on like dogs, while those three, not a whit better than we, are making themselves rich for life. What do you say?"

"They'd never 'gree to share 'th us," muttered Paul, reflectively, yet with his eyes glowing and his breath quickening.

"They must, if we say so. I, for one, am willing to fight for it. Just think—Duplin said he found nuggets as large as his fist! And hundreds of them, too! Just think, man—why, there's enough to make us the rich men in the United States! They must share—or else we'll take the whole!"

"That'll be the best way," hoarsely added Chicot, now fully yielding to the power of the yellow fiend. "There won't be enough for all—for we must take another. They're strong men, and will fight for ther—for our gold. It is ours—it must be ours!"

"Good! but the other—who shall we select?"

"Tim Dooley—I know him well. For gold he would pawn his soul to the devil—and then blarney him out of his pay afterward."

And so it was settled. On the succeeding night the three men, who were standing guard, deserted and took up the back trail, forgetful of the dangers that threatened the wagon-train in being left without a competent guide. Upshur chuckled with devilish glee as he hoped the worst would befall them.

He had proposed to Lottie Mitchell, and she had rejected him. Her father also had forbidden him ever again addressing his child, under penalty of a thrashing. For this reason, seeing that all hope of success in that direction was gone, he hoped that the entire train might be attacked and destroyed by the Indians or mountain outlaws, that infested the Overland Route, almost from end to end.

Caleb Mitchell was at his wits' end when the truly alarming tidings was generally made known on the morning following Chicot's disappearance. And not without good cause for apprehension, for the train was now fairly in among the mountains, where a deviation from the right trail—at times wholly undiscernible—might well result in total destruction.

As wagon-master, head of the train, only second to the regular guide, he was naturally the one to whom all now looked, when in truth he was no more capable than any other member, except from his great coolness and superior judgment. All were equally ignorant of the trail, since this was the first venture across the plains.

Mitchell's first move was to send in pursuit of the deserters, with orders to bring them in at all hazards, it found. That last clause was well put in, for Paul Chicot had an easy task in that wild, broken region, in blinding his trail, so that all pursuit was useless. And, with so many long

hours the start, it was like sending a horse to run down the locomotive.

Long after dark, the different bands straggled in, weary and dejected. Not even a foot-trace had been found to indicate the direction in which the deserters had gone; and now, that faint hope gone, the greater portion of the emigrants gave way to despair.

In vain Mitchell strove to cheer them up. He said that it was only a matter of time and patience; that before long some other train must come along which they could join. But the answer came, quick and crushing, because it was the one that was chilling his own heart.

It was late in the season. Their train, drawn wholly by oxen, had been long upon the road, and the halt at the "sick-camp" had still further delayed them. They might be the last train on the road—very probably were, since the mountains of California could not be crossed after winter set in. A train might not come along until the spring—and that would be too late. How many of the party could live through a winter in the mountains? They looked for train would only find their bones.

Harassed by such arguments and fears as these, Caleb Mitchell resolved upon a bold course, and yet apparently the only one that was left them. He would make the attempt to guide the train through the mountains himself, at least until they could gain a spot more favorable for a winter's residence than here, if worst came to worst.

Fearing to lose more precious time, long before daybreak the next day, the wagon-train was slowly following the lead of Caleb Mitchell, who rode in advance, his heart troubled with fears and doubts, for behind him was the sole remaining tie that made life dear to him, and its fate in a great measure depended upon his skill and prudence.

Several hours later, as he saw the crest of a rocky hill, over which the trail led, he abruptly reined in his horse and gazed keenly across the valley before him. He had distinguished the slowly-moving form of human beings, evidently afoot, and the hope that these were the returning deserters set his heart afire.

But all too soon this delusion was dispelled, for he now could distinguish the flowing drapery of a woman. Anxiously enough he awaited their approach, but as they paused on discovering his figure outlined against the clear sky, he impatiently rode forward. He could now see that there were only two, and the formation of the trail forbade the supposition of an ambush being possible there.

As he approached them the man stood before the woman, with drawn and leveled pistol, a look of stern despair imprinted upon his worn but handsome features. His voice rung with the desperation of a hunted fugitive turned at bay, as he spoke:

"Keep your distance—we will not be taken alive."

"What do you mean? Who's trying to take you alive—or dead either, for that matter?" ejaculated Mitchell, surprised at the man's tone and action.

"Then you don't—you're not one of those from whom we escaped? You haven't been chasing us?" doubtfully added the stranger.

"Scarcely—else I would not be coming from this direction," laughed Mitchell. "You have nothing to fear from me, if it is as I surmise. I claim to be a gentleman, though in rather rough guise just now—but that matters little. Yonder comes my train. You are welcome to all it affords, sir. As for the lady, my daughter will be pleased to supply her wants as far as she can."

"Thank God!" murmured the woman, springing forward, and, seizing Mitchell's hardened hand, she moistened it with tears. "You will protect us from that—from those dreadful men!"

"With my life, lady," warmly returned the wagon-master, deeply affected, yet feeling not a little curiosity regarding the strangers, wondering to what he was pledging himself, and who "those dreadful men" could be.

"You are very kind, sir, but my heart is too full of gratitude to thank you now as you deserve. When you hear our sad story, you will not wonder that we are weary and worn out and need rest. Bear up, daughter—we are safe with good friends, at last!"

"But, father—these men—they must have perceived us!" answered the woman, tremblingly.

"Perhaps not, but—"

"If there is any danger, sir, tell me what it is, so that I can put my friends upon their guard. We all know how to handle a rifle, and

it must be a strong force to trouble us while on guard," proudly interrupted Mitchell.

"There may be danger, but I hardly think it will come near. We were pursued by a party of mountain outlaws, at least until a short time since. But they don't number over a dozen, at most. They would never dare attack here, unless joined by their comrades at the Retreat."

"We will be on the lookout for them. But you must need refreshments. Such as we can afford is at your command. After that, I should like to hear your story. Naturally, this strange meeting has greatly excited my curiosity."

"I do not need much—only a drink of water, or something stronger, if it is handy. As for my daughter Mabel, here, she is entirely worn out! If you will be so kind—you spoke of a daughter?"

"I will introduce them. Though Lottie is far from well—her poor mother's death has nearly killed the child—she will gladly do all that is in her power to comfort your daughter."

"I too have lost my mother," softly murmured Mabel, her large eyes filling with tears, as she glanced up into the stalwart emigrant's face.

"Poor child!" muttered Mitchell, yielding to a sudden and uncontrollable impulse, and bending low in his saddle, he imprinted a fatherly kiss upon the smooth white forehead of the maiden.

Mabel's face flushed, but she did not appear to take offense at the abrupt action, though she cast a swift glance toward her father. Then, with an effort, Mitchell recovered himself, and soon explained the facts of the strange meeting to the wondering emigrants, the train having caught up during the delay.

Mabel was kindly greeted by Lottie, and then the white-tilted wagons hid them from view. The father was furnished with the beverage he desired, and then, seemingly forgetful of fatigue and weariness in his anxiety for the welfare of the wagon train, he rode along ahead of the train on Mitchell's horse, while the latter walked.

"You say you have no regular guide?"

"He deserted us night before last," moodily replied Mitchell, his brow lowering.

"Can it be that he is in league with these devils?" mused the other, half to himself. "It looks black—very black!"

Mitchell glanced impatiently at his companion. These vague hints were alarming, when coupled with the still unexplained appearance of the couple in that wild and apparently unsettled region.

"Mr. Mitchell," abruptly uttered the stranger, "I am about to tell you a very strange story, and you would do well to listen to it very closely, as, if I mistake not, it concerns you and yours deeply. First, my name is Guilford; I am a retired officer of the regular army, and Mabel is my only child. Why we left a comfortable home in the East to journey overland to California, does not matter just now—suffice that we did."

"The wagon-train which we joined passed over this spot full two weeks ago. Thus far, I had worked smoothly and agreeably. The company was a strong one, formed of intelligent and agreeable people. The guide was thoroughly capable, and gave perfect satisfaction. And yet—I and my child alone remain to tell the fate of all that company!"

Mitchell could not repress a cry of horror.

"Wait. You must have heard of the devils in human shape that haunt portions of the overland trail! Though they do not often attack full trains, they do much of the mischief that is wrongly attributed to the Indians, disguising themselves as such, the better to carry out their nefarious schemes. Well, we fell into the hands of a company of these demons."

"Our guide betrayed us. As I now know, he belonged to the band of outlaws, and only joined our train to betray it into the clutches of his comrades. All that he done, I learned afterward. No one suspected his fidelity until all was lost."

"He led us from the right trail. None thought of doubting him, and we walked blindly into the trap. I was mostly in company with Mabel, who was just recovering from a fit of illness, else I might have detected the change, for I had once before passed over the route."

"Well, just before dusk the end came. The foremost wagon was suddenly checked by a rocky barricade, that completely filled the narrow passage. The guide had vanished. Then came the shock, as the teamsters and passengers flocked ahead to see what was wrong."

"From the hillside above us came a deadly

storm of rifle and pistol-bullets. On every side was death. Not a foeman was to be seen, and yet the withering storm swept man after man to death. And not alone the men. Women and children, even the toddling babes, were shot down. None were spared. In ten minutes all was over.

"Taken so by surprise, what could we do? Nothing. Scarcely one had a weapon at hand. Such as had, were too astounded to think of using them. And even had this been different, what could they have done when not a foeman was visible? The rocks above seemed to be raining down death upon us. Not a form could be seen; not a voice mingled with the din of firearms, save from the dying as they fell in heaps. My God! it was terrible!" and Guilford covered his eyes and groaned aloud as one in mental agony.

"Pardon my emotion, Mr. Mitchell. Though an old soldier, never before had I witnessed such a frightful sight. My heart bleeds again at the mere thought." And Guilford shuddered again.

"But you—how did you escape unburnt?" curiously asked Mitchell.

"I can explain that now, though at the time I believed it a proof of Providence. But that was part of the plan. I spoke of our guide. That man was none other than the chief of the outlaws. He had joined us and acted as guide, the better to entrap us. He was a handsome, dashing fellow, and it seems now that he took a sudden fancy to my daughter—curse the villain!

"I was with Mabel in the wagon, and he knew this. He pointed it out to his men, and cautioned them against injuring its inmates. With the first shot I started to give my aid to our friends, but Mabel, half-crazed, seized me, and I dared not leave her. It would have killed her, in her weak state.

"When the guide came to the wagon and ordered us to dismount, I realized the truth, and fired at him. But in my haste, the bullet that should have bored his treacherous brain missed its mark, killing a man standing just beyond him. I was seized and bound, though I struggled desperately. Only for the guide—Yellow Jack—I would have been killed on the spot. But he had a purpose in saving me, for that time. Through her love for me, he hoped to bend my daughter to his will.

"We—Mabel and I—were carried away into the mountains, and so were spared the horrible scene that must have followed. Yellow Jack told me of it afterward. The wounded were put out of their misery, and then tossed down a deep ravine hard by, where the wolves and vultures would soon hide them from mortal sight. The wagons were burned, after being plundered, and the ashes scattered to the winds. All traces of the horrible massacre were obliterated, leaving the trap ready for other victims.

"Well, 'tis an unpleasant subject to dwell upon, and I hasten on as fast as possible, yet telling all that is necessary for you to understand the matter. We—Mabel and I—were taken to the hill retreat of this Yellow Jack, and were, for a time at least, treated reasonably well. Then, however, as Mabel gave no signs of softening her manner toward him, he began to show his devilish nature by torturing her with fears for me. Finally, he gave her two days to decide; either to become his bride or see me murdered before her very eyes.

"But we had a friend that he little suspected, in his wife—a beautiful woman who appeared to fairly worship the monster. The fear that Mabel would entirely supplant her in Yellow Jack's love, gave her the courage to foil his purpose by a daring stroke. In the middle of the night she set us both free and led us beyond the line of guards, then giving us the clew to finding the trail, she bade us begone—to suffer death rather than recapture, for after this her hands would be tied. She gave me these pistols, and a small package of food. Then she left us.

"We journeyed by night, and lay hid among the rocks by day, well knowing that we would be pursued, and that the entire country would be scourred. To-day, for the first time, we ventured forth during daylight. You know the rest—how we found you, and how warmly we were welcomed by all," concluded Guilford, evidently deeply affected.

"Then, if this band is so near, this train is in danger!" uttered Mitchell, in a troubled tone.

"No, I think not. The band is not strong enough to openly attack such a train, and they would scarcely dare to form an ambush along the regular trail. We only suffered through our traitorous guide. You are safe so long as

you keep the main trail and see that your sentinels do not neglect their duty. True, you may chance to lose some stock, and care must be taken that stragglers do not wander far from the train, else the outlaws might wreak their spite upon them."

"But our guide is gone—has deserted. How do we know whether we keep the right trail or not? Indeed, we may be straggling from it this very moment."

"You are right so far. The only danger of straying will be during the next two or three days. After that the route is plain and broad. But do you mean to say that you are *all* new hands—that there are none here who have ever passed over the trail before?"

"That is the fact."

"Well, we must do the best we can. Though I have made one trip before this, I paid comparatively little attention to the trace, and don't suppose my judgment is much, if any, better than yours. Still, between us, I think we can manage to pick out the right course."

Meantime the two maidens, Lottie Mitchell and Mabel Guilford, had already become fast friends, and picturing great enjoyment in each other's company during the remainder of the journey.

#### CHAPTER V.

##### WHERE WAS JACK TYRREL?

OVER a bed of gold.

The three gold-seekers were indeed in the valley of treasure. A few hours of earnest work in the "pocket" revealed riches beyond account, and so infatuated did all become with the results of their labor that scarcely could the one detailed to the daily service of hunting for food take the time necessary to procure proper supplies.

Nothing had occurred to disturb their intense labors, although more than once the hunter for the day had come across strange tracks in the vicinity of their golden bed, and the soul-sickening dread that assailed Robinson Crusoe, on his desert isle, now found a resting-place in their hearts. They fancied this was the track of some malicious minded enemy who was watching them with the intention of robbing the golden store that had grown daily more and more dear to them.

A sad change had come over the trio. Their friends and loved ones would scarcely have recognized them, even after these few days of success. Pale, haggard, and hollow-eyed they toiled on almost unceasingly, scarce speaking a word through the livelong day, even seeming suspicious of each other, sleeping fitfully, often awaking with a start as if from some haunting dream to glare at the spot where their treasure was hoarded away. A sad, sad change, and one that was daily growing more and more apparent.

Day by day, hour by hour, the insidious gold-fever was gaining in power over them, crushing out all generous thoughts, tightening its grasp upon their heart-strings, until scarce one trace of their former selves was left.

Nearly a week had elapsed since their arrival at the valley of gold. It was night, and though the past day had been one of almost breathless toil, the three adventurers sat awake and sleepless, smoking their pipes in silence beneath the rude, frail shelter of vine-clad brush.

All without was dark and dismal. The air was charged with electricity, and the comrades found it impossible to sleep. All nature seemed feverish and ill at ease.

The moon was obscured; dense sulphurous masses of clouds swirled athwart the horizon in wild confusion. Low, sullen mutterings filled the air. A tempest was brewing.

Silently smoking, the gold-hunters watched the play of the clouds. They seemed to care little for the result. What mattered it though they did get wet? The rain could not injure their golden treasure, and what else had they to care for? Nothing.

Suddenly Paley Duplin sprung half erect, outstretching one hand as the pipe dropped unheeded at his feet. His voice sounded strangely excited, trembling violently.

"My God! look yonder—that light!"

Far up the bed of the one-time water-course, a light seemed slowly moving to and fro. This, of itself, in that lone and desolate spot, was enough to excite wonder. But it was the shape of the light gradually assumed as it drew nearer that caused Duplin agitation.

Speechless the three men glared at the vision as it slowly drew nearer to where they sat. Neither spoke. They seemed petrified with horror.

And well might this be the case. The past

week had sadly weakened their nerves. This horrible reserve that had come over them since delving amidst the masses of gold, had rendered them doubly susceptible to superstitious influence.

They could no longer doubt. The shape, glowing with a ghastly light, was now vividly outlined.

Before them, at only a few rods' distance, stood a skeleton of fire!

A skeleton, perfect in the most minute detail. It seemed of gigantic size, as though the relic of some long since extinct race of giants.

The brainless skull, the eyeless sockets, the wide, ghastly-grinning mouth and blazing teeth, the body, the arms and legs, all were glowing with a strangely weird luster, not unlike that produced by the use of phosphorus. One fleshless arm was slowly lifted until the dangling finger pointed directly at the spot where crouched the gold-hunters, awe-stricken and speechless.

And still the flaming skeleton advanced, more and more, the arm warningly outstretched, the skull wearing that horribly mocking grin.

Suddenly a low, taunting laugh echoed upon the still oppressive air—a laugh that seemed to issue from the fleshless lips.

Duplin shuddered, and bowing his head, covered his face as if to shut out the sickening object. Wythe and Tyrrel remained motionless, their eyes riveted upon the skeleton.

A voice uttering words followed the laugh. Deep yet low, something strangely impressive when coming from that ghastly spectacle, as it appeared.

"Blind fools! ye are trespassing here on holy ground. Depart while yet there is time. You hear—even the spirits of the air warn you. Obey their voice—flee—flee from the wrath to come! Take heed. 'Tis the last warning. Depart—or the morrow's sun shall shine down on your lifeless remains."

A laugh slowly followed this speech, coming from the rude hut of bushes. It was from Jack Tyrrel, sounding strained, yet scornful.

"This mummery has gone far enough," he said, in a tone that told of rising anger. "It's my turn now. Whoever you are, you take warning. In just one minute, unless you drop that mask, I'll try if you are bullet-proof. Mark my words, now!"

"Don't, Jack—for God's sake don't!" gasped Duplin. "Tis nothing earthly—it's a warning from the other world!"

"Bah! I've seen a skeleton doctored with phosphorus before now."

"Lift your arm against the dead, and it will drop withered to your side," solemnly added the voice.

"It will, eh? Here's to try it. Man or devil—here's greeting to you!" recklessly cried Tyrrel, as he raised and sighted his revolver.

Again came the laugh, hollow and unearthly. The fleshless face seemed to grin more horribly than before.

Once—twice the pistol spoke spitefully, the flash momentarily lighting up the little brush shanty, then leaving it in still deeper darkness from force of contrast. And yet the skeleton stood there, motionless, save that the arm appeared to move derisively.

The laugh again echoed forth, as the reverberating reports died away. Duplin sunk upon his face, groaning in terror. Wythe knelt as though petrified. Tyrrel turned a shade paler.

"Silly fool! you provoke your fate. When the sun rises you will be dead—dead."

The glowing figure swiftly moved forward, and seemed about to attack the gold-hunters. Jack hastily lifted his pistol and fired, then sprung o his feet as though in readiness for the struggle.

When the smoke-cloud lifted, he rubbed his eyes in amazement. All was black before him. Nothing was to be seen. The apparition had vanished as though swallowed up by the earth.

Only for a moment did he hesitate. Then, still, clutching his pistol, he darted from the shanty and glanced around him. All was vacancy.

He leaped upon the sand-bank, and swept his eyes around. The result was the same. No light—nothing save a far-distant flash of lurid lightning.

A disinterested spectator would have laughed outright, could he have seen Tyrrel's face at that moment, so full of blank amazement was it. And yet there was nothing in it of superstitious fear.

Only for the first few moments had Jack yielded to the feeling, and then simply because his comrades had done so. This quickly van-

ished and anger took its place. He was startled at the new effect of his shots, because he had great confidence in his own skill. Then, too, he marveled greatly at the abrupt disappearance, but that he wisely attributed to clever skill.

Thoughtfully scratching his curly pate, Jack retraced his steps and entered the shanty. In silence he lighted his pipe at the still smoldering embers, and then puffed away vigorously, covertly eying his comrades the while.

"Well, boys," he at length uttered between puffs, "what do you think of it, anyhow?"

"It is gone, then?" muttered Duplin, in a husky voice.

"Yes—cleverly, too. A smart chap, who ever it may be," quoth Tyrrel.

"You are wrong—it was nothing mortal. It was a warning," gloomily added Duplin.

"Now don't be a fool, Paley," impatiently. "The days are passed for such melo-dramatic visions as that. We will live to see a great many to-morrows. It is nothing but a very stale trick got up to frighten us from our work. Somebody has got wind of our discovery, and takes this plan to drive us away. But I, for one, don't care worth a cent! And as first move—before it rains—I'm going to see what sort of a track that ghost left behind him. The sand out yonder is soft, and will retain a footprint. Come—you'll admit that a spirit—even though it assumes the guise of a living skeleton—cannot leave a natural footprint? Very well. If I do not find the tracks of a man out yonder, I'll agree to believe in your view, and at once make my will, provided you promise the same. If the track is there you'll give up those superstitious ideas?"

"Yes," was the reply given by both Duplin and Wythe.

Jack said no more, but set about arranging a torch in order to settle the question once for all. Meantime Wythe had directed Duplin's attention to something not far from the shanty, apparently lying upon the ground.

This was a small point of flame, flickering vividly, now larger, now smaller. It was near where the skeleton had stood.

Tyrrel soon emerged, holding the torch before him, but as he advanced, the point of flame grew dim, and then vanished entirely. Bending low down, he began closely scanning the ground, while Duplin and Wythe intently watched his motions.

"You're cornered now, boys," he said aloud, with a laugh, rising erect. "Come out here and own up that you've been silly fools. Here are the tracks as plain and clear as mud."

Beginning to feel ashamed of the exhibition, the two soon joined Tyrrel, and kneeling, slowly scanned the ground. As Jack had said, the sand was soft, and easily retained the imprint of a human foot.

And such an imprint lay before them, plain and unmistakable. Even Duplin could no longer doubt that all this had been the work of a cunning hand, though by no means a spirit.

"And see," laughed Jack, "here's a memento of our ghostly visitor. A finger-joint that one of my bullets has broken."

"That was what we saw lying here. Hold it in the dark, Jack—yes, that is it," muttered Wythe, as the bone again showed the flickering light.

"And there comes the rain—but first, I'm going to have the measure of this foot. I think I owe the rascal that made it a sound thrashing, and if we ever meet, he'll get it, or my name's not Jack Tyrrel!"

As the storm burst, the gold-hunters regained their shelter, and composed themselves as comfortably as circumstances would admit. Knowing that they were in for a drenching, they only cared to keep their weapons and ammunition dry.

It was impossible to sleep while the storm raged with such violence, and Jack continued his good work by lecturing his comrades. He showed them the point toward which they were drifting, and that ruin must follow unless they rallied against the spell that seemed falling upon them.

"Why, in less than a month—if this sort of thing keeps on—we'll be ready to cut each other's throats. It is *horrible!* I'd rather turn my back on the gold altogether and live poor all my life than to pass another week as this one has been."

"I agree with you, Jack," warmly replied Duplin. "There is gold enough for us all. Let's clasp hands and forget the hard work. Hereafter let's be men—not savage dogs."

"Amen!"

Through that livelong night the three, com-

rades once more, conversed earnestly. And when day came, they were ready for work.

It was plain now that their secret was no longer *their* secret—that they had been watched by some one who knew of their rich discovery. And it was likely that this watcher also knew of their "bank"—the spot where their treasure was stowed away.

Before daylight they removed the gold to another spot, the driving rain obliterating all traces as soon as made. This done they looked to their weapons.

The spy, whoever he might be, must be found, though a week was spent in searching for him. Only for the beating rain, this would have been a comparatively easy matter, since the ground, clear to the hills, was very favorable for trailing.

Day broke clear and beautiful, and Duplin experienced a peculiar thrill of joyous thankfulness as he beheld the brilliant sun roll above the eastern swells. The sight gave him renewed life, and the last lingering trace of superstition vanished.

For hours the three friends sought in vain for some trace of their nocturnal visitor, but it was not until they crossed the first ridge that such rewarded their search. Then, deeply imprinted in the moist sandy loam, they came upon a double trail, though both sets of tracks were evidently made by the same person, probably in going and coming, as they trod different ways.

"It's our man," cried Jack, as he arose from comparing his tally with the tracker. "We must run him to ground, now. He can't be far—these tracks are fresh."

"But which are the latest?"

"That puzzles me. I'm not much on the trail-hunt. Chicot could tell, no doubt, but I can't. We must follow both. You and Wythe take that direction, and I'll look to this."

"But there may be danger to you going alone. We don't know who or what this fellow is. Best keep together."

"And so lose the game, like as not! No. I think I can hold my own, since there's only one man. Go on—and if you find the game, build a fire of grass that will send up a black smoke. I'll do the same. Look out for it."

It was rank folly attempting to reason with Tyrrel, and his comrades well knew that. So parting—none of the trio dreamed of the time that would elapse before their meeting—they each bent to their work.

The trail ran lengthwise along the valley, only divided from that where lay the golden bed by a high ridge. Duplin and Wythe were heading south-east; the trail followed by Tyrrel was in an opposite direction.

"I think I can tell just how this will end," muttered Burr, after progressing a mile or more. "I think we will find the stopping-place on yonder point, where we can look down upon our camp. If so, we must hasten back, and join Jack. The hot-headed fellow may get into trouble."

A few minutes more proved their surmise to be correct. The trail doubled at the hill, and then ran back for a ways, side by side.

The friends had no difficulty in retracing their steps, and advanced at a half-run. The damp earth had retained deep tracks.

In ten minutes they had regained the point where Tyrrel had left them, and still hastened after him. Then they paused, simultaneously uttering a low cry.

"Too late!" gasped Duplin.

Faint and indistinct came to their ears, borne by the favoring breeze, two quickly succeeding pistol-shots, closely followed by a cry, as of pain or mortal terror. These sounds came from up the valley.

Clutching their weapons, the friends bounded forward at top speed, their faces pale, their teeth tightly clinched. They feared the worst.

"My God! look there!" gasped Wythe, extending one trembling hand.

Before them, close to where the rocks that thickly covered the hillside began, the ground was torn and trampled, as though the scene of a desperate struggle for life. And upon one side of a whitely bleached boulder was a large crimson stain.

A stain that could only be produced by blood!

Sick and faint the comrades stood there, wildly glancing around, listening anxiously for some sound to guide them. But it came not. All was stilled save their deep, husky breathing.

"Come," cried Duplin, with an effort rousing himself, "this is folly. We must work. Dead or alive, we must find Jack, and either rescue or avenge him."

Dreading lest at every step they should come upon the dead and mangled body of their friend hidden among the rocks, the gold-hunters advanced. Here and there a blood-splash guided their eyes. Drop by drop it led them up the hillside. This alone guided them. The flinty ground retained no trace of footsteps.

A gore-stained rock attracted them. Rushing forward, Duplin uttered a low cry. Then he sunk upon his knees and bent forward.

Burr Wythe turned sick at heart, and staggering, would have fallen but for the friendly support of a jagged boulder. A cry broke from his lips as he started back and removed his hand. It had entered a tiny pool of fresh blood!

## CHAPTER VI.

### LOST IN THE LABYRINTH.

WITH a convulsive shudder, Burr Wythe wiped the clotted blood from his hand. Duplin, startled by the cry of his comrade, quickly turned his head.

"What is it, Wythe?"

"Nothing—I rested my hand in that blood yonder. But what is this—a cave?"

"It must be—and see! There are bloodstains on the inside edges of the rock. Whoever, one or many, have gone in there, taking poor Jack with them, either dead or alive," muttered Paley, as he drew back and carefully looked to his weapons.

"Then out of it they must come," determinedly returned Burr, his eyes glittering.

"But how? If in there, they have the advantage of us in every respect."

"There is only one way. We must enter and do the best we can."

"It looks like suicide, after what we see here; but if you dare risk it, I will not fail you. We cannot desert the lad. He would risk as much for either of us."

"Here—let me pass in first. I can get some idea of what is before us, and if they mean mischief, they'll wait to make sure of us both. Do you keep back from the entrance, but ready to assist me if I call."

Pale but resolute, Wythe crawled into the hole, and then glared quickly around him, as though in hopes of being able to penetrate the dense gloom. That his heart beat quicker than common, is no disparagement to his courage, for there is nothing so trying as facing an unknown danger in the dark.

Feeling around, he found several pebbles and flung them violently from him. From their faint echoes, he learned what he desired.

"It's a large cave, Paley," he uttered, as he emerged into the open air. "We must not enter without material for torches. We might pass within arm's-length of poor Jack, and not know it."

Thoroughly determined to find their missing comrade, and if possible those who had struck this blow, the two men scarcely gave a thought now to the danger they might be incurring, nor how completely they would be at the mercy of any hidden enemy, while they were bearing lighted torches. So, while Wythe guarded the cave entrance, Duplin hastily collected material for torches.

A few minutes sufficed for this, and then both men entered the hole. Thus shielded from the wind, they soon succeeded in kindling a torch, and then, while one held it aloft, the other kept just within the circle of light, with cocked and ready revolver. In this manner, one at least would be running less risk. Duplin, as being the best shot, held the latter position.

The two friends curiously glanced around them. But little was to be seen, save the jagged roof of rock, as the torch emitted but a feeble light.

Still, a few moments stowed them that the chamber in which they stood was untenanted save by themselves. It was of considerable size, irregular in outline, rough and jagged, with a low roof or ceiling.

"Look! here is a sort of tunnel," muttered Wythe, waving the light before him. "Ard—yes! here goes the blood-drops. Poor Jack! if it's his blood, he must be dead."

"Mavbe not. A little makes a big show on rock. But let's baste—I'm eager for the end. Anything, even the knowledge of his death, is better than this suspense."

"If he is dead, somebody must pay for it!" gritted Wythe, vindictively.

The tunnel was low and narrow, and the explorers had to stoop their heads to avoid the rocky roof. More than once Wythe fancied he could distinguish the trace of tools wielded by human hands upon the soft rock, but other thoughts occupied their minds, though at an-

other time this fact would have excited the deepest curiosity.

The tunnel was winding, now sheering abruptly to the right, then again to the left, and several times Wythe paused in doubt, as two passages met his gaze. But a close and cautious scrutiny would show a drop of blood upon the floor of one or the other, and thus guided, the adventurers pressed on, further into the labyrinth, without a thought of their own peril—thinking only of their lost comrade. From first to last of that day they exhibited a strange lack of prudence.

Their progress, owing to these causes, was slow—far more so than, in their impatience to learn the fate of Jack Tyrrel, they believed—and the winding passage frequently caused them to almost retrace their footsteps.

Suddenly Wythe came to the end of the tunnel, and stepped into what seemed a spacious chamber, though he could only judge from the difference in the atmosphere. The torch was of little service, save within a radius of several yards.

A few minutes' scouting proved this also to be unoccupied by those they sought. At irregular intervals around the sides were several tunnels similar to that from which the men had recently emerged.

Exchanging glances, the friends saw that each had begun to despair. After this long and really arduous search they seemed no nearer the end than at first.

"Come," whispered Duplin, rousing himself, "this is only wasting time, when we should be at work. Cheer up—we must find him soon. I know we will—I feel it!"

"I hope you are a true prophet," sighed Wythe, brushing the cold damp from his forehead. "But I fear the worst."

"Give me the light for awhile, and you take my place. We must search each tunnel until we find the right one."

"I fear that will be difficult. I've not noticed any blood-drops for some time. What if we should be wrong? What will become of poor Jack? And—how are we to find our way back again?"

Duplin started. For the first time he realized the full peril of their situation. Were they not even then lost? Lost in the labyrinth—in the bowels of the earth! And nothing to sustain life—no food, no water! The thought was soul-sickening!

"We must not think of that now. We've enough to trouble our minds without that. It may all turn out right. But mark the passage we came through. With that to start from, we can find our way back by the blood stains. Drop my hat there—or a bit of rag, anything will do."

Wythe advanced a step, then paused and glanced around him. His face shone ghastly pale in the feeble light of the tiny torch. It seemed that of a dead, rather than a living man.

"I—I think this is the one," he faltered, pointing to a passage.

"My God! don't you know? Then we are indeed lost!" groaned Duplin, the cold sweat dripping from his brow.

"We have walked in every direction—I am bewildered. We can do nothing only trust in Providence."

"And so we will! I don't believe we are to perish in this manner. Cheer up—'twill all turn out for the best," cried Duplin, rallying his courage.

"I'm willing enough to hope for the best, but these events follow close after that man's warning of last night. There may have been more in it than we cared to admit."

"Come—no more o' that, Wythe. You only unnerve us both. Mark this tunnel. We will first explore the one next upon its right—remember that. In time we must strike the right one."

Entering the low-arched passage, Duplin led the way, holding the torch so low that it fell full upon the floor. Leaving all other matters to Wythe, he closely and thoroughly scrutinized the passage in search of the blood-drops that had already guided their course so far.

"I'm afraid we're wrong, Burr," muttered Paley, after several minutes. "I can find no traces."

He had just rounded an acute corner in the passage, and thus cast Wythe in the gloom. Stepping forward, Burr abruptly paused.

"My God! look yonder!" he gasped rather than spoke, one hand extended over Duplin's shoulder.

The latter raised his eyes and then started back. Truly a horrible sight was before them.

A dull, ghastly light seemed to fill the space before them. A light that danced and flickered fitfully—now brilliant, now dull.

There, apparently almost within arm's length of the two adventurers, were half a dozen flaming skeletons, not lying prone upon the floor, but seemingly just starting up from their recumbent position to chastise the unhallowed disturbers of their last repose.

Fiery jets of flame seemed to dart forth from the eyeless sockets, from the grinning jaws, from every bone that helped form the skeletons, and all with that peculiar effect produced by the plentiful use of phosphorus.

As if turned to stone the two friends stood at the turning, glaring wildly upon the weird tableau.

Then there echoed forth a startling sound, that seemed to proceed from the glowing jaws of the blazing skeletons. A laugh, shrill and unearthly, that echoed thrillingly through the long, narrow passage.

"My God! they move—they come!" yelled Duplin, as he dropped the torch and dashed madly back the way he had come, by some rare chance escaping a shattered skull from collision with the numerous jagged points of rock.

With that horrible laugh still ringing in their ears, Wythe followed after, half-dead with terror. Gasping, nearly suffocated by the wild throbings of his heart, Duplin gained the chamber, and then sunk down weak and trembling. Though life depended upon the exertion, he could go no further.

"Burr—where are you?" he gasped, agitatedly.

"Here—thank God we are together!" came the low reply, as Wythe crept to his side. "But the light—where is it?"

"I dropped it—I was so astonished. But we can kindle another. I have matches and you have wood."

"I—no, I must have lost it as I ran. I had two sticks when we entered, but they are gone now," slowly returned Wythe.

Both remained silent. Each realized the full force of this new calamity. Without a light how could they ever hope to find their way out of this labyrinth? With a light, the task would be hard enough—without one, it became simply impossible.

"We must regain them, even though we have to face that horrible sight once more," muttered Duplin, with a resolution that was simply sublime, when his superstitious nature is remembered.

"Did you hear it, too?"

"The laughter—yes. It was no delusion. Pray God that I may never hear it again!"

"Hark!"

A low, indistinct sound met their ears. It seemed to proceed from the passage they had just left. Its precise nature they could not define, but—perhaps the thought was excited by what had just occurred—they fancied it was the faint echo of that horrible peal of laughter.

"It's coming nearer—what shall we do?" gasped Duplin, tremblingly.

"Remember what Jack showed us. There is some trickery here, I feel sure. If we flee blindly through these passages, we are indeed lost. We must meet what is coming. If really supernatural, we cannot run away from it. If human, we can solve the mystery with a pistol-bullet," hurriedly muttered Burr, as his revolver clicked sharply.

His resolution seemed to restore Duplin, and then in silence they awaited the result, though in painful suspense, for neither was free from a sickening dread. Few men are equally brave in the dark and light.

The suspense was not of long duration. Another shrill, unearthly peal of laughter rung through the rocky chamber, and then, as if by magic, a glowing skeleton, with every bone plainly outlined, stood before the two gold-hunters.

Duplin hastily cocked his revolver. It seemed that the sharp metallic click was not unheard, for another laugh, low and taunting, came from where the ghastly object stood. Then a voice—the same that had addressed them at their camp the preceding night—uttered the words:

"Poor silly fools! Do ye think to alarm the dead by such actions? What care I for mortal weapons? You but precipitate your fate by such rashness. You scorned my first warning—and now you see the results. One of your number is dead—you two are doomed! Doomed to wander on through the bowels of the earth unceasingly, until death takes pity upon your sufferings and touches your hearts with his finger of

ice. You were warned—why did you throw the chance behind you? You sealed your own fate. You are doomed—doomed! Ha! ha!" and again the chilling peal rung forth.

And yet, strange as it may seem, these words gave Burr Wythe renewed courage. Though a partial believer in spiritualism, he did not believe that disembodied spirits could speak.

The owner of this same voice had, at the camp, left a substantial proof behind it that scarcely befit a ghost. And now this voice admitted the identity.

"Tis some trick, Paley," he whispered in Duplin's ear.

"Fire when I do, and we will have the clew in our hands. For poor Jack's sake, courage."

"I will—touch me when you are ready," came the low, cautious response.

"Now!"

As he shouted aloud this word Wythe fired, and almost simultaneously Duplin's pistol spoke. And the effect exceeded their most sanguine expectations.

High above the twin reports, there rose a human voice in a wild yell of pain, then came a rattling crash—then the sound of heavy, repressed footsteps.

Instantly, on fire, Duplin and Wythe sprung aside, and recocked their pistols. But there was no need of a second shot. The victory was theirs.

The glowing skeleton lay upon the ground, shattered to pieces. The skull, like a great ball of fire, was slowly rolling toward Wythe, who eyed it with a shudder of loathing. But all else was motionless and still. The fleeing footsteps that had momentarily caught their ear, was now gone.

"Our spirit was Jack's trickster, after all," at length uttered Wythe.

"We were fools, Burr," laughed Duplin, his natural courage returning. "It's a lesson that will never be forgotten by us; and it was one that I needed, too. I'm becoming a slave to my superstitions. But did you notice which way he went?"

"No. Still, with lights, we can find out, I guess. That cry was one of pain. He must have been wounded."

"He was; perhaps mortally, though I hope not, for that might lose us our hopes of finding Jack. But, come; we must find our torches. There is no time to lose unless we wish to make good that rascal's prediction, and die in here of thirst and starvation. This is the passage—just behind these bones."

Carefully feeling along the passage, they soon succeeded in finding the dried fagots, dropped when they took a hasty flight. One—the torch—was still smoldering, and required but little coaxing before it again blazed up.

By its light, the two friends exchanged glances. They were both thinking of the same thing.

"Yes, we will examine them," exclaimed Duplin, resolutely advancing. "Who knows—we may find some trace of him there."

With far different sensations than those felt when first the weird sight burst upon their vision, the gold-hunters now examined the row of skeletons. They lay side by side, upon a sloping ledge, which, in the first affright, gave them the appearance of raising to their feet. The friends saw that at least two of the skeletons had been removed from the ghastly row.

"They have been placed here with care," muttered Wythe. "See—here are fragments of what was once cloth. The bones look as though covered with skin—as though the flesh had gradually dried away, and the sinews still hold together. That accounts for the perfect skeletons we saw arranged by that rascal—whoever he is."

"This dry, rare air may account for that. But we must not forget the duty we owe poor Jack. He is not here."

"Come, then. We can follow our mummer, if I mistake not. I think he'll leave a plain trail behind him, if there's any virtue in half-ounce bullets."

In a few moments the adventurers were once more in the chamber, and examining the ground round about where the skeleton had fallen. True to their hopes, they found several drops of blood that told plainly their enemy was wounded.

"This is the passage," uttered Duplin. "But it seems to lead back the same way we came."

"We are all turned round. It may, of course, but more likely it continues in the direction we first started in. It is our only chance, at any rate."

For half an hour more they crept on, slowly and carefully, knowing that to go astray might

result in their destruction. Several faint torches were observed, but close scrutiny showed them the faint bluish traces, that directed them aright.

But then a circumstance occurred that threatened them with disaster. The second torch had burned nearly down to Wythe's fingers, and he paused to light another. Unfortunately he dropped the splinter, and falling, it became extinguished. Blow as he might, the sparks refused to blaze up.

Impatiently he asked Duplin for a match. To his horror, Paley answered that he had none. Whether he had lost them during the flight or not, it was certain that they were then in the labyrinth, without means to kindle a light. Search as they might, not a match was found.

As the significant truth burst upon them in its full force, they seemed like madmen. They raved and cursed until out of breath. Then reason returned. They were only wasting precious strength that might yet be needed to save them from a horrible death.

"Come, Duplin," hoarsely muttered Wythe; "we must be men. We need our senses now, if ever. We must find some way out of this. Come; creep forward with me. Try to keep this passage. Perhaps we may succeed—it is our only hope."

"A slim one," and Duplin smothered back a curse. "I begin to believe that that prediction will come true—that this hole is our grave."

"Don't give way to such thoughts. Hope while we may. The worst, if it must come, will come soon enough."

For an hour—a long, weary hour, full of agonizing fears and doubts—the comrades crept slowly on, upon their hands and knees, not knowing whether they were nearing or distancing safety.

But then Burr Wythe, who was in advance, gave way to a gasping cry—a cry of joyful thanksgiving.

"Thank God! we are saved! This is the first chamber—I can tell it."

"But—" hesitated Duplin, "then we should see the light. Where is the hole we crept in at?"

All before them was dark and black. They could see nothing.

And now Wythe remembered that as he first entered the tunnel, he had glanced back. The hole then shone clear and distinct. It was gone now!

With a cry of apprehension he arose and sprung forward. In a moment he discovered the truth.

This was indeed the outer chamber. And he felt where the entrance had been. It was now blocked up!

They were buried alive!

Both sunk to the ground, heart-sick and despairing.

## CHAPTER VII.

### NATE UPSHUR'S WORK.

On the night of the storm, Nathan Upshur sat apart from his two comrades, noiselessly smoking his pipe. That he was not in the best of humor was plainly evident.

It was only several hours since they had come on the whereabouts of Wythe and his companions, after an arduous search of several days' duration. But yet, short as was the time, Upshur had proposed a bloody plan to Chicot and Dooley—nothing less than murdering the gold-hunters, and then taking their treasure.

His ill-humor now was caused by their flat refusal to enter into anything of the sort. They had counted the cost, and were willing to enforce their rights to a portion of the placer, if need be, by an appeal to arms, but it must be in open fight, not midnight assassination.

But Upshur objected to this. It savored too much of personal danger, and that he did not greatly fancy. So he sat brooding over the matter, sour and sullen.

"It's jest this," quoth Chicot, settling the ashes in his pipe. "They must let us in on shar's. I'll tell 'em that I knew of it fust—last year—an' that I on'y jined the train so's to git to the place. They cain't deny it—or, ef they do, they cain't prove that I lie. Then ef they cut up rusty, let 'em. We kin make 'em sick o' the job, I reckon. But I won't hev no onderband work—no rubbin' out in the dark—mind that, Nate Upshur."

They were encamped upon the hillside, in a deep crevice in the rocks that overhung their heads, where the tiny camp-fire was hidden from any one until within a half score yards of the spot. And, as he stated his position, Paul Chicot lay down to sleep, untroubled at the coming storm.

But that night was marked with utter disturbance, even with terror. Only the clear report of fire-arms broke upon the air, coming, as all knew, from the gold-hunters' camp.

Peering over the rocks, they saw a strange, luminous light moving above the valley, but before they could guess its meaning, the light suddenly vanished. While still gazing down, they heard a rapid footfall just above them, and then a strangely-shaped, dark figure bounded past them, up the rocks. It seemed the form of a man, bearing an unwieldy bundle upon his shoulder, dark, and dimly outlined.

Little slumber visited their eyes that night, and his curiosity excited, Chicot plunged through the storm on a reconnoitering expedition. He soon returned, saying that the three gold-hunters were still in their shanty.

Then who or what was the dark figure? Were there still other parties in the valley? Others after the golden hoard that lay beneath the sands?

Awaiting other developments, Chicot and his companions, early in the morning, saw the three friends start forth as if with some definite purpose in view. They hastily passed over the rocky ridge, unconscious of the eyes that so closely watched them.

"Now's our time," eagerly muttered Upshur. "We can go and dig up their gold and be off before they get back."

"Not yet," firmly replied Chicot, who seemed to possess a little more conscience than his comrades. "We don't know how soon they may be back, and I don't want to be caught stealin', jest yet. Let's watch and see what they're about, fust."

Grumblingly Upshur submitted, and the trio crept up to the ridge, and peered over it, keeping well screened. From there they saw the others discover the double trail and closely examine it. Then separating, Duplin and Wythe took one course, Jack Tyrrel the other.

"They're trailin' the critter we see'd, most likely," muttered Chicot. "Let's watch until they git out o' sight, then we'll go fer the gold."

Impatiently they watched the tardy progress of the adventurers, for now that a chance seemed open for them to effect their object, they were one and all eager to handle the gold. From their position the valley below them was visible for nearly a mile in either direction, bare and treeless, desolate and dreary-looking.

"My eyes bain't as good as they war once, but, onless I'm mighty mistook, they's trouble waitin' fer Jack, over yon. I'm 'most sure I sighted a human on them rocks. But it's gone, now. This 's gittin' interestin'—seems like we're goin' to bev two separate gangs to deal with."

With curiosity fully aroused, the trio watched Tyrrel's progress, and as he passed round the point of rocks indicated by Chicot, the watchers fairly held their breath with suspense.

Then came the sounds that had so deeply alarmed Duplin and Wythe—two quickly-successive pistol-shots, then a cry for help.

"I told ye so," muttered Chicot, excitedly. "Tyrrel's in trouble 'th somethin'! Down—quick! See, thar comes t'other fellers. Ef they sight us, it's fight, then, shore. They'd think we was at the bottom o' the deviltry. Hunker down, I say!"

"Now's our chance to get hold o' the gold," muttered Nate Upshur, eagerly. "We'll have time."

"No—I'm goin' to see this afa'r out fust. It's best that we know jest what an' who we've got to work ag'in', an' we'll never hev a better chainte to find out. Come—keep along behind the ridge. We kin git up opposite the spot where Jack was, afore t'others. Keersful—don't show your head 'bove the ridge."

Though having the longest and by far the roughest road, Chicot and his companions gained the desired point ahead of Duplin and Wythe, owing to the latter having to follow Tyrrel's trail. But though they closely scrutinized the opposite ridge, nothing in human form was to be seen.

"The boy's gone, an' so's whoever he run ag'in'. Mebbe he's rubbed out, an' the fellers is layin' fer t'others."

"We'll soon see, for there comes Duplin and Wythe," added Upshur.

In silence the trio watched and waited. Every movement of the two comrades was noted. What they were the reader already knows.

For a time the watchers were puzzled, but then as the two men began gathering dried sticks from under the sheltered rocks, the truth gradually became plain. Paul Chicot gave vent to a long, low whistle.

"They've holed the game!"

"Surely the fools ain't going to venture in?"

"It is foolish, but they show plenty o' grit. You see now what you wanted to buck ag'in'."

"If they go in there the game's in our hands!" exultantly muttered Upshur, his eyes glowing wickedly.

"What d'y mean by that?"

"Can't we block them in? Then they'll have a good chance to fight it out with those they are bunting, while we can take our time about the gold. In that way we get rid of them without killing them, and just as effectually too."

"I don't see much difference, if ye lave them there to starve," slowly commented Tim Dooley, for the first time for hours giving his opinion, in this respect being very different from the popular idea of an Irishman.

"If you're so cursed tender-hearted, why don't you go and offer to help them? Had I known what a milksop you were, I'd never have lifted a finger to help you to a fortune."

"Nor would ye, only ye wanted help. But best kape a bridle on your tongue, my fri'nd. I don't take black words from anybody," quietly added Dooley.

"Dry up—quit yer quarrelin'. Whar's the use? It don't do no good, an' only makes bad blood. We're workin' in harness now, an' each must keep up his eend. Fust work—then pleasure. Fight then as much as ye please. But I think that's a good idea o' yours, Upshur. We kin block 'em in, s'posin' they give us a chaine, an' then, when we're ready to travel, we kin set 'em free. But mind ye, this we've got to do. I won't take a step in the matter onless this is all understood."

"Nayther will I."

"Just as you like about that," impatiently added Upshur. "But we're losing valuable time. That may be but a small den, and we be too late. Then if they see us, it must come to blows."

"Ef they begin, why we'll give 'em the best we've got, in course. Come then, le's travel."

Descending the ridge, the three men ran hastily across the level valley, and soon gained the second hill. As the reader knows, this danger was not suspected by either Duplin or Wythe.

"You and Tim see if you can roll over that big rock above there," muttered Upshur, kneeling down beside a boulder. "I'll agree that they shall not disturb your work, if they hear you too soon. I can keep them back, I guess."

At that moment, as he covered the entrance to the cave with a revolver in either hand, cocked and ready, Nathan Upshur ardently hoped that the two men he hated with such venomous animosity would appear. A good shot, he felt that the path before him would soon be cleared, and the stain of the midnight murder fairly fixed upon the innocent Burr Wythe.

Exerting their strength to the utmost, the two men at length succeeded in toppling over the boulder, that must have weighed many tons. Had it not been so nicely poised, their efforts would have been in vain.

As the huge mass settled fairly over the hole, Nate Upshur laughed aloud in diabolical glee. He knew that mortal hands could not remove the rock, without the aid of strong tools. In the excitement of the moment, neither Chicot nor Dooley had thought of this, and they now felt a pang of regret. It seemed as though they had been committing a cowardly murder.

"That's one job done—and well done, too. I call it," and Upshur chuckled. "Now for the other. We alone are the owners of this famous golden bed that Duplin raved about. Come—I am in haste to know the extent of our fortune. Don't look so grum—you should laugh instead, man."

"I feel like a dog that's caught sheep-killin', or aig-suckin'," muttered Chicot. "We've mebbe rubbed out two settlers as is a durned sight better men than either o' us, in a cowardly way, too."

"Bab! I suppose you'll be too conscientious to touch any o' the gold they've dug, won't you?" said Upshur.

"I don't know—if they be gone, why I suppose I might as well take me o' what they left, as for you to git it all."

"I thought so! But come—the sooner we finish this job, the better. There may be another outlet to the cave, and these tools may stumble upon it, and come back in time to make us trouble. But once let us get clutches on their pile, and I think we can hold it."

With hasty steps, the three men recrossed the little valley, and from the other ridge, carefully reconnoitered the deserted camp. No one appeared to be near it, and their hearts thrilled wildly as they realized that they were now sole

masters of the golden secret. Even Chicot forgot his scruples, in the dream of fabulous wealth that filled his mind.

"It's ours—all ours, now!" muttered Upshur, as he darted down the rough hillside at reckless speed, slowly followed by his comrades.

In a few minutes more they stood within the rude brush shanty. Eagerly they gazed around, as though expecting to discover great heaps of the precious metal. Then Upshur laughed—harshly and discordantly.

"Hah! what fools! Of course they've hid it. But what one hides, another can find. They've changed the gold to another place—for there's where it has been."

All could see as much, but the gold was not there. Still, it must be hidden near at hand.

### CHAPTER VIII.

#### THE WILD MAN AGAIN.

MEANWHILE, where was Jack Tyrrel? We left him at the moment when he turned round the point of rock, following on the strange trail. A few rods beyond this, and he suddenly paused as a peculiar cry met his ear.

Hastily glancing up, a strange sight met his gaze. A flash of recognition lit up his face. He had seen that form once before.

It was, indeed, none other than the occupant of the hill-cave, whom he had beheld fed like a child by the beautiful maiden; the one whom he had, a few hours later, seen shot at by Nate Upshur. The being called by Paul Chicot, the "Mountain Devil."

He stood at the base of a large boulder, one hand outstretched, clutching his long bow already spoken of. His attitude, his face, his eyes, all told that he was angered.

"Back! rash fool!" he uttered in a deep, stern tone. "I warned you once—this is sacred ground. Back, I say, or you die!"

"Don't be so headstrong, old man," coolly returned Jack, seating himself upon a boulder. "You have nothing to fear from us. When we finish our work, we intend leaving—and allow me to add that you nor any one else can make us stir one step before we get ready."

The wild-man—or madman, whichever he was, and both titles well suited him—uttered another hoarse, inarticulate cry, and, with lightning-like quickness, fitted an arrow to the string. Jack sprang to his feet, but was too late to avoid the shaft.

It struck him fairly, pinioning his right arm to his side, the dinty head plunging deep into the muscles of his side and back. Stung with pain, and scarcely realizing the extent of his injuries, Jack drew a revolver with his left hand, and fired twice in succession, at the same time uttering a half-unconscious cry for help.

Then the madman was upon him. With a giant's strength he dashed the young man backward to the ground, and wresting the pistol from his grasp, he dealt Tyrrel a stunning blow upon the head with its brass-bound butt.

With a low moan, Jack lost all consciousness. The events of the next few hours were a blank to him.

Probably urged on by some strange whim, the madman flung the senseless body across his shoulder and then darted back to the cave entrance, through which he plunged. As though gifted with cat-like eyes, he ran swiftly on through the winding passage, never once seemingly at fault, the only trace left being the drops of blood that fell from Tyrrel's wounds.

When, at length, Tyrrel regained his senses, he first became conscious of a gentle hand softly bathing his feverish and painfully-throbbing temples. With an effort he opened his eyes and gazed wildly around him, bewildered, confused.

But then, as a pale, sweet face bent over him, anxiety written in every feature, a wondering sigh broke from his lips. He recognized that face—it had more than once come up before him since that first night passed in the mountains after the desertion.

The same glance recalled the place he was in: the hole in the wall where he had first looked upon the face of the madman. But how came he here? Could it be that the madman had relented, bringing him here to be nursed back to life and health by his own daughter?

These thoughts racked his mind, and must have left their imprint upon his face, for the woman—or girl, rather, for she was not more, in years, at least—gently pressed back his head, uttering in a low, soft voice:

"You must not trouble your brain now, sir.

All will be explained in good time. Until then, rest easy. You are safe here, while I am near."

"But where am I?—and you—"

"Listen. You are still in danger, unless you are prudent. Drink this, and then go to sleep. When you waken, I will tell you all that I know of this affair, and she uttered a weary sigh, as she spoke.

"I will mind—you look like an angel," muttered Jack, his heavy lids drooping as he sunk back after quaffing the drink. "I've thought so ever since—that night. And I—I love—you!" The last word being scarcely distinguishable, as he dropped asleep.

The maiden looked astonished, as well she might, since, until a few hours before, she had never once suspected the existence of such a personage as Jack Tyrrel.

It was hours before Jack awoke, but then he felt much better, though still very weak and faint from much loss of blood. His brain, though light, did not throb, his flesh was cool and moist.

He was not long in reminding his fair nurse of her promise, and in a few clear sentences she told him all she knew concerning the matter.

Her father—the madman, for such indeed he was—had returned from one of his frequent excursions, bearing the senseless body upon his shoulder, both covered with blood. She could gather nothing from his incoherent ravings, save that he intended offering up his victim as a sacrifice to some imaginary deity. Great as was her influence over him, even in his wildest moods, it was with absolute danger to herself that she rescued Jack from his hands. Then, however, he soon calmed down, and watched her dress Tyrrel's wounds with vacant curiosity. This done, she discovered that her father also was wounded; a deep burst, evidently from a bullet, passing entirely through the left shoulder. Scarcely waiting for this to be dressed, he left the cave, muttering wild threats against some person or persons. That was in the early part of the night; it was now broad day, and she was very uneasy concerning him.

Such, in substance, was her explanation. In return, Jack briefly sketched the events of the past few days.

"And now, lady—"

"Lucy is my name," she simply added.

"Thank you—and mine is Jack Tyrrel. But I was wondering—naturally, too, as you must admit—how it happens that you are here, living in such a place."

"I will tell you; it will help pass away the time, and anything is better than silence. Such terrible fears come over me at times, that I often wonder if I am not going mad—but I must not think of that. Do you know, sir, that until now, for over a year, I have not looked upon a human face, excepting father's?"

Jack squeezed her hand sympathetically. Lucy shrunk back as if alarmed, but, then, blushing deeply, she hastily added:

"Well, I will tell you my story. It is a strange one, and often I half-wonder if I am not dreaming—if all the black, horrible past is not a dream, from which I shall awake some bright day."

"As I said, my name is Lucy—Lucy Bradford, and the man who brought you here is my father. He was not always thus—his madness dates back to a year or more ago."

"Father was ever peculiar, and after mother's death—which occurred when I was quite a child—he became still more so, and I can now understand the covert hints and strange bits of talk that used to puzzle me, passing between the neighbors. They believed he was gradually losing his mind."

"It was a queer but very pleasant life that I led, as I began to understand things that I saw around me. Father was an actor—as I believed then, the prince of actors—but the plain, almost miserable style in which we were forced to exist, should have showed me better. It was one constant, unceasing struggle for bread, and yet we were very happy."

"Father loved his art, and was only fully happy when 'treading the boards.' And he was sure of an appreciative house, behind the scenes, for I would applaud until my poor hands were nearly blistered. I half-fear that it was this that made father love me so dearly."

"I attended each rehearsal with him, and was never absent from my post in the flies when he was on the stage. This became such a matter of course that no attention was paid me by the other actors."

"Well, times changed. Father became so 'queer'—that is what the stage-manager called

it—that he could not be depended upon. More than once I remember his marring the effect of a play by forgetting himself, and delivering the 'mad speech' of King Lear. He was discharged, and could not get another situation."

"One day, I remember, he came home greatly excited, hastily packed up all his stage effects and then left the house without answering my questions. He returned with money, having sold all. Then he told me of the dazzling plan that he had in view. He was going to California, to pick up a fortune from the countless heaps of golden treasure that lay there."

"Well, I could not desert him. That was in '49—over a year ago. Father had money enough to pay for our passage out, and leaving St. Louis, we turned our faces toward the Land of Gold. Alas! not one of all that train—men, women, children—not one of them all ever reached the land of their hopes."

"I do not know whether the story of our disaster ever reached civilization or not. If so, it must have been by accident, for we—father and I—alone, of all that company, are now alive!"

"One wild, stormy night the blow fell. The day past had been one of unusually severe toil, and most probably the guards set to watch over the safety of their friends and kindred, completely exhausted, yielded to slumber. For the cunning, treacherous enemy crept, unheard and unsuspected, into the very heart of our camp. And then—"

Shuddering, Lucy paused, bowing her head upon her hands. The scene recalled by her story overpowered her.

"Don't say any more, Lucy, if it is so hard," whispered Jack, his hand gently touching the bowed head.

"Perhaps I am foolishly sensitive," Lucy added, with a wan smile, as she raised her head.

"But at times that horrible scene comes before my eyes until it seems that my brain must burst. It is a relief to speak of it, though, to one who can understand."

"I can remember but little of that horrible night. The Indians attacked us—Blackfeet, as I afterward learned. They conquered almost without a blow being struck by the white men, so complete was the surprise. And then—it was a merciless massacre."

"I remember wondering how long it would be before my time would come. I had been awakened, but was still in our own tent. Father lay at my feet, as I believed, still sleeping, though I wondered greatly that the horrible din did not waken him. I know now that he was senseless, stricken down by a brutal blow from the hand of the one who guarded me."

"This man was the one who had acted as our guide, a middle aged, rough, hunter-like person. He had joined the train with the sole purpose of luring it to destruction. How well he succeeded, you now know."

"It was a long time before I fairly regained my senses. For nearly a month I had been like a maniac, and the Indians had protected me from the malice of the renegade. This superstition alone saved my father. We were regarded as sacred beings."

"But then, when my reason returned, I was again subject to the persecution of the renegade—Creeping Snake, as the Indians called him. I appealed to the chief, who could both speak and understand English, though but imperfectly, for protection against the wretch. I believe that he pitied me, but he dared not interfere. By the laws of the tribe, I belonged wholly to the renegade."

"The end came sooner than I expected. One day the renegade came to the lodges that had been given my father and I, and one glance at his flushed face and bloodshot eyes told me my peril. He was intoxicated, and his worst passions were fully aroused."

"I shrank behind father in fear and trembling. The renegade advanced, with a horrible curse, and struck father, ordering him to stand aside. You have seen him—you know how very strong he is; and then he was insane."

"It was all over in a breath, almost. A brief, horrible struggle—then the renegade lay upon the lodge floor, quivering, dead! The blood was streaming from his mouth and nostrils. His neck was broken."

"The chief had witnessed it all, but had not time to interfere before all was over. He seemed frightfully angered, and had I not clung to his knees, pleading piteously, I believe he would have killed father. As it was, he had time to reflect that a madman was not accountable for his acts."

"A council was held, and father tried for the deed. But the fact of his madness saved him. And yet he seemed to realize that he was in

danger, though he hid his feelings from all save me.

"That night—a dark and stormy one—we left the village, passing through it undiscovered. By daylight we were far away, lost amid the wild mountains. The beating rain had obliterated our tracks, and if the Indians sought for us, it was without success.

"For days we lay hid during the day, trudging at night, trying to find some way to civilization, but in vain. We nearly starved to death. But by chance—or, rather, providence—father killed a wounded antelope that we found in a deep valley. On this we lived for several days.

"Father seemed to have forgotten his desire to reach his fellow-men, and appeared contented with this wild life. We were living in a little den or cave in the rocks; not this one—but another, miles away.

"One night we were awakened by a muttering at the cave-entrance. Outlined against the clear sky, we could distinguish the plumed crest of a savage. Probably he had observed us before night, and now had come to kill us.

"I was petrified with fear, but not so father. I did not know he was awake until I heard him move suddenly. Then came a dull, heavy thud, and the Indian's head disappeared, while a shrill yell of what seemed mortal agony followed.

"I soon learned the truth. Father, with unerring aim, had flung a heavy, jagged rock at the intruder. As I saw when day came, the blow had shattered his skull to atoms. That was a long, dreary night of terror, but the savage must have been alone, for no further disturbance occurred.

"In this manner father became armed as you have seen him, with bow and arrows, a knife and tomahawk. By long practice he has become very skillful with the bow, and we never want for food. As for clothing, as you see, their skins furnish that. Though rude, they are very comfortable.

"With that one exception, we have never been molested by the savages. During one of his wild rambles, father found this cave, and ever since we have lived here."

"A strange story, Lucy, and a sad one," commented Jack, feelingly. "But do you never long to return to civilization?"

"Often—very often. But what can I do? Even though the road was open to me—and I am lost here as completely as though out of the world—I could not desert father. You have seen him—do you think I would ever return to life? He is mad—incurably so, I fear," gloomily responded the maiden.

"But if I can induce him to go with us, will you object? You will like my friends, Duplin and Burr. Think of what your fate would be were—in case anything should happen to your father."

"I would die—perhaps starve to death. I try not to think of that. I only know that I can never desert him. I am all that he seems to care for on earth, now. While he lives, my place is with him."

"But if he agrees to go with us?"

"Where he goes, I will go. But don't think too much of that. I fear he will refuse."

"Hist! is that not the sound of some one climbing up the rocks?" hastily muttered Tyrrel, not a little excited, half-hoping that his friends had discovered his retreat.

"I will go see. Perhaps 'tis father returning," and Lucy hastened to the entrance.

In a moment she returned, pale and agitated. Tyrrel felt a strange fluttering at his heart, for he was unarmed. If an enemy, they were indeed lost!

#### CHAPTER IX.

##### THE OUTLAWS' HOME.

BUT what of the train wending its weary way among the hills, trying, under the guidance of Major Guilford, to follow the blind trail?

Ah, it is a query pregnant with sad events—with tears and sighs—with acts that make human nature seem like demon-nature.

For here, in the outlaws' lair, away among the hills—in his secret grotto—we find—who?"

Why, Lottie Mitchell!

And consoling her in her terrible grief is Mabel, the professed daughter of Major Guilford, but now the acknowledged wife and emissary of Yellow Jack!

And outside we hear the voice of Major Guilford, and learn from his conversation, first, the fact that he is Yellow Jack's first-lieutenant; and second, the particulars of the slaughter of that entire train, which, following his guidance, was led into an ambuscade, and every soul in it ruthlessly slain by the outlaws as they had destroyed and slain other trains. The diabolical glee which the affair excited in the outlaw camp revealed the nature of the ruffians with whom Guilford consorted.

But he had other matters also to discuss with

some of the men. He had rescued Lottie Mitchell and brought her safely into the outlaw camp only to see Yellow Jack take her under his immediate protection. Was he to be deprived of his property? Was not Lottie his own by the laws of the band? And if so, by what right did the captain take her under his protection?

This the "Major" demanded in a manner that showed how bitterly he felt over the event, and his openly announced purpose to have his prize yet, gave little promise of peace or safety to the now distressed and heart-broken captive, whose hours passed in weeping over the awful tragedy which her eyes had witnessed, and whose fears for her own future were even more harrowing than her grief.

For a time Lottie Mitchell was treated more as a guest than a prisoner by Yellow Jack and his household. Even Mabel, though herself scarcely so beautiful, strove to cheer up the sorrowing girl, even while a dull pain knocked at her own heart as she recognized the gradually changing expression with which the outlaw chief began to regard the fair captive.

None knew better than she that Yellow Jack was even more to be dreaded than Charles Guilford—that Lottie, in fleeing from the hawk, had sought protection of the eagle.

With heart crushed and bowed down, Lottie would sit through the long hours in mute despair. She knew now that she was alone upon earth—that not one drop of blood akin to her flowed in human veins. Her loving father had been the last, and now he was no more. He was dead—murdered! And she—oh! why had she been spared? To live on and suffer—to endure worse than death—a shameful captivity in the hands of demons who had love for naught other than sin and crime.

And yet, though knowing all this, Lottie believed that she was safe from harm while Yellow Jack extended his protection. She knew that Mabel was his wife—that a fierce, passionate love seemed to exist between them. Then—what had she to fear from him?

Thus she reasoned, but the mask was soon to fall from his face—the scales from her eyes. The trial, though slow in coming, would lose none of its force on that account.

A brief "scene" had followed the unceremonious despoiling of Guilford. His fiery, untamed nature was not one to submit without a word; besides, he was backed up by the laws of the league, that distinctly said a man possessed the sole power of life or death over any captive he might chance to take unaided.

Guilford waited until the entire band had returned. Then he called them around him in the little square of unoccupied ground near the center of the village. His undaunted bravery and boldness had made him very popular among the outlaws!

In hot, angry words he told them how he had been treated and how the laws of the league had been trampled upon without cause or provocation. He demanded their vote—whether the captive rightly belonged to him, or to Yellow Jack.

The outlaws seemed about to reply—to give the words utterance that would please the orator—when a clear, metallic voice silenced them. The outlaws, bold and desperate men though they were, seemed awed and shrank silently back, parting before the approach of that one slender, frail-looking man, who so negligently puffed at a tiny cigarette.

"Pardon, gentlemen," he uttered, the words dropping with cat-like softness from his red lips, that curled in a smile at once sweet and cruel. "Hearing my name mentioned, I come to plead my own case. Guilford, what is your grievance?"

"That you took by force from me a captive. By the laws of the league you had no right to do this. She is mine alone—I demand her return."

The words were spoken boldly and without hesitation. Yet the manner in which the flushed face turned white, told that Guilford by no means underrated his danger. It was like playing with a half-tamed tiger. At first its talons might be sheathed—but who could say how long this would last?

"So you consider yourself an abused man, do you?" slowly drawled Yellow Jack.

"I deem my rights as a member of the band, abridged. By the laws laid down by yourself, you are wronging me in taking away my property."

"And if I return her—this property of yours—you will overlook my mistake?"

"Gladly!" cried Guilford, too excited by the pleasing thought thus presented to read aright the sneering tone and the yellowish glitter of the black eyes.

"You are very kind. But I fear both my wife and your property would object. Besides, I've taken a notion to her myself. And captain before lieutenant, you know."

"Then you refuse to—"

"Bah! why so much to do about a trifling you grow tiresome, Guilford. We will have to select another officer from the ranks."

At this sentence—the last—Yellow Jack gave an evidence of his marvelous quickness. A sudden glitter of steel—a flash—a report, and then a death-groan.

Charles Guilford lay upon his face the blood slowly oozing from a tiny, discolored hole in the center of his forehead.

A low cry rose round the group. A simultaneous movement—and full two-score hands fell upon as many weapons.

The tall, lithe form drew more erect, with head flung back and eyes that seemed like glowing coals. Click—click! went the notch-like springs of his pistols.

The sullen roar of two-score voices ceased. The weapons, though still clutched, were not drawn. And the foremost slowly shrank back. Fear was written upon their faces.

And all this because one man seemed awakened; but that man was Yellow Jack.

"Gentlemen," began the outlaw chieftain, and his voice was as even and gentle as when first he spoke. "I have a few words of explanation to give you why I shot that carrion. It was because he was a traitor at heart—to me, if not to you. I saved him from the hangman's rope, and brought him here. He served admirably as a man; but raising him to be an officer spoiled him. You elected him; I could not refuse, though I knew that this day must come in time. Well, he's dead. There is no use in producing proof of his treachery, unless some of you demand it. Then I will comply, of course. Is any one dissatisfied? If so, let him advance and give in his plea."

No one advanced. Perhaps they deemed it scarcely prudent to do so, with that body still lying before them.

Yellow Jack smiled. He had conquered now, even as he had scores of times before, by sheer audacity. And now Lottie Mitchell was his; no one could dispute his choice, unless—He scowled as he thought of Mabel, his wife.

"Good! I am glad to see you so sensible. Of course, we must have another election. To-morrow will do. Talk the matter over between yourselves. The choice lies with you." And then Yellow Jack walked away, without so much as a glance at his victim.

Meantime, Lottie Mitchell had been aroused from her torpor—as it might almost be called. And this by one of whom we have had only a fleeting glimpse—the being called by Yellow Jack "Crazy Joe."

He had glided into the little cell-like apartment adjoining "the grotto," where Lottie was sitting in apathetic despair. She glanced up at his entrance, but recognizing him, again drooped her eyes.

"Lady," whispered Crazy Joe, after a keen glance around the chamber, "cheer up. You have a friend near who will do his best to free you. Be cautious—do not cry out. If they suspect who and what I really am, both you and I are lost," he added hastily, as Lottie gave vent to an exclamation of surprise.

This was the first time she had heard him utter an intelligible sentence. To her, as to others, he had been the harmless idiot. For what had he been playing such a part?—for now there was no trace of idiocy, only the sharp, acute decision of a bold and determined man.

"I don't wonder at your surprise," he added, with a kindly smile, as he drew nearer. "I have played my part well, and, indeed, I had need to, since my life depended upon its success. But never mind that now. I fear interruption before I can explain. Listen, now. I am telling you the truth, and placing my life in your hands."

"As you see, I am no idiot. That is my mask, put on the better to enable me to gain my purpose. Instead, I am a spy—a spy of the Government. My purpose now is to learn all the secrets of the place, so that when the time comes for another attack, they can't baffle us as they did the last time."

"I assumed this disguise and wandered for days among these hills before I was picked up, almost starving, too. I was brought here and closely questioned. I was only an idiot—so I made them believe. Only an iron will carried me through, for they tried me in every manner, even waking me from a sound sleep with a quick question. But I had studied my part closely, and foiled them."

"Now it is time for act second. I have learned all I care to know, and must disappear. They will think nothing of that, for I am an idiot," and he laughed silently, but gleefully. "They'll think I've wandered away, or been killed by wild beasts. And then—well, they'll see me again, and with me will be a host of 'boys in blue.'

"Why do I tell you this? Because you are in great peril—not of death, but even worse than that—and will need all the courage you can muster. I would take you with me, but that would ruin all. Pursuit would be made—for you—and I killed. Then would your last hope die."

"You must wait patiently, and, if possible, gain time. I will be back in two weeks, at furthest. If you can evade the peril until then, we will save you. If not—then we will remember you while dealing with our blow. Do you understand me?"

"Partly. But what is this great peril—he is dead, and Mabel is my friend. Surely, she will not let them murder me!" And Lottie paused in genuine surprise.

"I will tell you, then, though 'tis a delicate subject. But this is no time for false delicacy. Then—I allude to Yellow Jack—to his passion for you," he allude added the man.

"But he—Mabel is his wife!"

"True—or passes for such. But that matters little to him. Why did he kill Guilford—his best and bravest man? Because that man claimed you—whom he wanted for himself. Now do you understand me?"

"I—think I do," faltered Lottie, turning astutely pale.

"Then—listen. The trial will come—sooner or later. It may come to-day—or it may not come until we return. For your sake I hope not. But you must be prepared for it. You must play a part. You must hide your real feelings, and dissemble. Though keen as steel, you can blind him in his passion with your mother wit. Affect to think of the matter. Tell him you are too heart-sick—that all around is so new and strange that you must have time to reconcile yourself to the change. Tell him anything—only gain time. Gain two weeks, and I pledge my word—my life, that you shall be saved. I give you the word of a man who never lied unless to an enemy, such as those with whom I am now dealing. Only two weeks, at the most. I may re-



to whether they had seen the madman—or, as he said, Mr. Bradford. Warned by their suspicions, they said little of what had occurred, but volunteered to go in quest of him.

"Thank you, boys. I'd go, but this confounded hurt won't let me. Take a look at the camp while out. He may be there."

Their hunger appeased, the two men descended the cliff, and set off at a rapid rate toward their camp. After an hour's hard walking they reached the crest of the hill from which they had first gazed down upon the valley that contained the bed of gold nuggets.

Both paused with a simultaneous cry. Human forms met their gaze. Their camp was occupied!

Over a mile distant, they could not recognize sex or color. Of course, none but men were there, but were they white or red—enemies or friends! Scarce-ly the latter, though.

The two friends exchanged glances. A hard, de-termined expression rested upon each face, and their eyes told their resolve.

A fortune, hard-earned, lay there, belonging to them. Should they abandon it now, after all that they had endured? No!

Neither spoke a word, but looked to their pistols, renewed each cap, after seeing that the nipples were well primed. A miss-fire might be fatal, now.

Then they glided forward, not seeking to hide their movements. That, after the valley was reached, would be impossible. Nearly a mile of level sand, without a rock or shrub, must be passed over.

And yet they reached the watercourse unmolested, unchallenged, unless the one feeble shout that came to their ears was such. They stood amazed. A terrible spectacle lay before their eyes.

Four men lay stretched upon the ground, only one of whom gave signs of life. He had dragged himself to the brush camp, and was now lying in its shelter.

The others were dead. Two of them lay upon their faces, the flint-head of an arrow protruding from each back. The other, close by, still clutched a bow; in the other hand was an arrow, that could not be fitted to the string before death overtook him.

"It is the madman—Bradford!" muttered Duplin. "And that man is Paul Chicot!" added Wythe.

"Help, friends—for the love of God! help!" gasped the wounded man—the sole survivor of this tragedy.

It was hours before Chicot could explain this scene.

First, be told all—how Upshur had tempted him and Dooley, and of all that had occurred since then. Of how the madman had warned them away, when Upshur incautiously shot him. Even as he fell, Bradford had his revenge. Like lightning-bolts, three arrows sped, and two men died. The third, with sure aim but failing power, pierced Chicot's breast, inflicting a severe but not necessarily fatal wound, now that he could have care. The robbers had searched in vain for the buried store of gold, and Wythe found it intact.

And then, while Wythe nursed Chicot, Duplin hastened to carry the mournful tidings to Lucy. For a time she sunk beneath the shock, but then revived. It had in a measure been expected. She had known that his life could end only in that way.

Thus it chanced that a week later we find her cooking for the busily-laboring gold-hunters, and nursing Paul Chicot.

## CHAPTER XII.

### EXIT YELLOW JACK.

LATE one night Duplin came into camp in a state of considerable excitement. It being his day to act as forager, he had remained so long absent, that his companions were very uneasy lest harm had befallen him. Great was their agitation when he made known his discovery.

Wandering further to the south than customary, he had just before dusk come upon a large encampment; after a brief scouting he recognized the body as being United States soldiers. He did not venture nearer them, but at once hastened back to lay the matter before his friends.

Here was a safe escort at hand, by accepting which they might be spared all the toil and danger they otherwise might expect to meet on their return journey to the States. But, on the other hand, there was their gold. It could not be concealed, so that the eyes of the soldiers would not recognize it. Among so many, there might be some evil-hearted men, only too glad to win independence by an act of treachery.

The matter was thoroughly discussed, and then decided. They would trust to their former plan.

At this Paul Chicot gave a sigh of relief. He was yet too ill to be moved with safety.

This body of cavalry, as the reader guesses, was indeed that to which Joe Burleson had alluded in his conversation with Lottie Mitchell. He had succeeded in reaching it, and was now on his way back to the retreat of Yellow Jack and his outlaws.

Though Duplin did not know it, they had been resting their animals for several hours, preparing for a hard and forced march. That night the blow was to be dealt, and under cover of the darkness they hoped to gain the Retreat without being discovered, guided as they were by one so thoroughly familiar with the surroundings as was Burleson.

Joe had confided all to the officer leading the troops, and had gained his consent to a daring move. He had not forgotten his promise to Lottie; he would save her if possible. But would he be in time?

The bold spy shuddered as this fear assailed his heart. Though knowing her for so brief a time, he had given his entire heart to the pale-faced maiden. And the love of such a man, rude and unlettered though he was, was not to be despised.

With this view, Joe glided on in advance, while the soldiers dismounted and stood their horses at a safe distance, then removed all articles that, by jingling, could possibly alarm the foe too soon.

Dressed as he had been when first appearing at the village, Burleson entered without fear, knowing that Crazy Joe was a privileged person.

But the village was quiet. The outlaws seemed all asleep.

Not all! From the hillside, shining through the tiny windows that he knew looked out from the grotto, Joe caught the faint ray of a light. And more!

A half-stifled scream came from that direction. His teeth grated together, his eyes flashed with a deadly glow as he glided into the little hut that sheltered the entrance.

He recognized the voice of Lottie Mitchell!

He paused at the entrance of the grotto. All was still. But a sight met his eyes that fairly maddened him.

Near the center of the room a man was bending over the form of a woman; the latter seemed insensible.

The man was Yellow Jack. The woman was Lottie Mitchell.

Thank God! he was yet in time! Such was the thought that flashed across his mind like intuition. Why, he could not have explained himself.

He did not speak—made no sound. But he bounded forward like a panther that thirsted for blood.

One hand clutched the neck of Yellow Jack. The other, uplifted, clutched a long-bladed knife.

The weapon descended with a dull, thrilling *thud*. The steel guard dented deep into the outlaw's back. The blood-stained point protruded through the gayly embroidered shirt-front.

Without a groan, Yellow Jack sunk forward upon the insensible form of his intended victim, a dead man. The blade had cloven his heart in twain.

Tenderly Burleson lifted the maiden from the floor and bore her to the soft couch of skins beyond. Her eyes opened, and a murmur of thanksgiving told that she recognized him as a true friend.

In hurried words he told her all, and cautioned her to remain silent. Then, with a lingering glance at her, he turned and glided away to give the signal of death.

Silently, like the shadows of death, the soldiers glided up and gained foothold in the outlaws' village. And then—but why give details? Surely enough bloodshed has already stained these pages.

That the surprise was complete—that, as the roaring flames of their blazing huts roused the slumbering outlaws, the wild yell of assault was given, is enough.

The struggle, though brief, was desperate and bloody. The outlaws never thought of begging mercy. They knew that it would be denied them, and so, fighting, they died. An hour—then the band was annihilated.

The next day a strange cavalcade left the Retreat. Horses and cattle were heavily loaded down with plunder. In a comfortable litter rode Lottie Mitchell. Beside her was Joe Burleson. Poor fellow, he was happy then. But his awakening came soon enough, though his love deserved better reward.

In safety they reached Fort Laramie. And then Lottie was taken ill, and only awoke to life again when winter had snow-bound all within the fort.

And, oh! the joy that awaited her then! The form that first met her conscious gaze, worn and pale with long and constant watching, was that of Burr Wythe!

This fact is easily explained.

The "pocket" of gold eventually gave out, or afforded so little reward that it was not deemed worth while wintering there. So Paul Chicot—now fully recovered—and Duplin contrived to capture a sufficient number of horses and mules from those that had escaped to the hills during the attack on the outlaws' retreat, to mount the party and convey their precious gold. Chicot guided them a right to Fort Laramie, though the most of their gold was securely *cached* among the hills where it would be safe. Then they entered the fort. There they first heard the fate of the train they had abandoned, and found Lottie Mitchell, the sole survivor, besides themselves.

Burr was prepared to meet Lottie's words concerning the murder of poor Hefler. Upshur had confessed to the deed, and Chicot could bear witness to it. And then, though there was little need of the words, he confessed his love. And Lottie?

Well, she gained in health and spirits so amazingly, that long before the snow began to disappear before the warm breath of spring, there was a double wedding at the old fort, that occasioned more pure, heartfelt joy, as well as boisterous fun and jollity, than ever before marked its annals.

And then, when the green grass began to appear, a small cavalcade took its departure from Laramie, heading toward the rising sun. At nightfall Duplin and Chicot rode back and opened their *caches*, bringing with them its precious contents.

Never was a more delightful trip than that, but our space forbids a detailed description. They reached "the States" in safety. Paul Chicot settled at St. Joseph, Mo., and entered into the fur trade. He still lives.

Duplin returned to the loyal maiden who had so long waited for him. They, too, were happy.

And thus we leave them.

THE END.

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